

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

DOROTHY ALLISON

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

November 18 and 19, 2007
Guerneville, CA

This interview was made possible
with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

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Narrator

Dorothy Allison grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, the first child of a fifteen-year-old unwed mother who worked as a waitress. Now living in Northern California with her partner Alix and her teenage son, Wolf Michael, she describes herself as a feminist, a working class story teller, a Southern expatriate, a sometime poet and a happily born-again Californian. Awarded the 2007 Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction, Allison is a member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

The first member of her family to graduate from high school, Allison attended Florida Presbyterian College on a National Merit Scholarship and in 1979 studied anthropology at the New School for Social Research. An award winning editor for *Quest*, *Conditions*, and *Outlook*—early feminist and lesbian & gay journals, Allison's chapbook of poetry, *The Women Who Hate Me*, was published with Long Haul Press in 1983. Her short story collection, *Trash* (1988) was published by Firebrand Books. *Trash* won two Lambda Literary Awards and the American Library Association Prize for Lesbian and Gay Writing.

Allison says that the early feminist movement changed her life. "It was like opening your eyes under water. It hurt, but suddenly everything that had been dark and mysterious became visible and open to change." However, she admits, she would never have begun to publish her stories "if she hadn't gotten over her prejudices, and started talking to her mother and sisters again."

Allison received mainstream recognition with her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, (1992) a finalist for the 1992 National Book Award. The novel won the Ferro Grumley prize, an ALA Award for Lesbian and Gay Writing, became a bestseller, and an award-winning movie. It has been translated into more than a dozen languages. *Cavedweller* (1998) also became a national bestseller, a NY Times Notable book of the year, a finalist for the Lillian Smith prize, and an ALA prize winner. A novel, *She Who, Is* forthcoming.

Interviewer

Kelly Anderson (b.1969) is an educator, historian, and community activist. She has an M.A. in women's history from Sarah Lawrence College and is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. History at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Abstract

Because Dorothy Allison has written extensively about her childhood and early family life, this oral history focuses on Allison's political activism and involvement with feminism, beginning in Tallahassee, FL in the 1970s. She recounts "finding the movement" at Florida State University through the Women's Center and her parallel life in the bars, among butch-femme dykes, and her struggle to integrate the worlds of middle-class politics and working class erotics. Allison describes her myriad connections to the women's movement—from being a founder of Herstore, a feminist bookstore, to *Quest*, to the anti-violence movement, to *Conditions*, and the Lesbian Sex Mafia. Throughout, she offers an uncompromising

assessment of feminism's triumphs and failures, particularly through the lenses of class and sexuality.

Restrictions

Dorothy Allison retains copyright to this interview.

Format

Interview recorded on mini DV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Five 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Susan Kurka. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Sheila Flaherty-Jones.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Allison, Dorothy. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, November 18 and 19, 2007. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection.

Footnote: Dorothy Allison, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, November 19, 2007, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Allison, Dorothy. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, November 18 and 19, 2007. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Dorothy Allison, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, November 19, 2007, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23-24.

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Sophia Smith Collection
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Transcript of interview conducted November 18 and 19, 2007, with:

DOROTHY ALLISON

by: KELLY ANDERSON

Guerneville, California

ALLISON: You go to these little colleges, and it's always the little boy techies. They get so nervous about touching lesbians.

ANDERSON: And they want you to put on your own mike.

ALLISON: Well, they're smart, because I'll teach them. That's the virtue of having been a waitress. Very few things are too humiliating. Okay. Is that on right or –

ANDERSON: Yeah. You just don't want it touching –

ALLISON: It's right in the cleavage.

ANDERSON: Your shirt's going to ruffle against it.

ALLISON: All right, so move the hair.

ANDERSON: There you go. This is Kelly Anderson with Dorothy Allison, at her home in Guerneville, on November 18th, and we're doing an oral history for the Voices of Feminism Project, the Sophia Smith Collection.

ALLISON: Am I in focus?

ANDERSON: Yes. I think you look good.

ALLISON: Thank you.

ANDERSON: You look great. I think you look great.

ALLISON: Is my gray hair glinting in the light, my silver?

ANDERSON: I see none.

ALLISON: What a pity. I worked damn hard to (inaudible).

ANDERSON: (laughs) So, as I said before we turned on the camera, the purpose of doing this interview for the Voices of Feminism Project is to add your story into the women's movement record.

ALLISON: Yeah, it's tricky.

ANDERSON: It's really tricky, and I know you have — that your history is there.

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: And also your writing and in terms of — And when you said, "Feminism saved my life."

ALLISON: Yeah. Over and over again.

ANDERSON: One of the things that I like best that you said — and again, that's kind of where I wanted to start — "Though rarely acknowledged, women like me remade this world."

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: And so I'm going to do this interview so we can rewrite the women's movement from a different perspective.

ALLISON: Or just save it from being erased, which is the thing that constantly happens.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So let's start with how you found the women's movement, and what your awareness of it was. Do you want to start with college?

ALLISON: I think I became dimly aware of the women's — and it is dimly aware — of the women's movement in college the last — not freshman — junior and senior year. I believe there was a CR [consciousness-raising] group, and I vaguely remember going to check it out, and essentially panicking, because I was a lesbian and it was — oh my God, it was 1970.

ANDERSON: You went to college [Florida Presbyterian College] in '67.

ALLISON: '67.

ANDERSON: So you weren't aware of any women's events?

ALLISON: Only the stuff that appears in the magazines and newspapers — *Life*, *Look*, and all that shit. But I was active in the antiwar movement and marching. And we had a very active anti-Vietnam War movement in

Florida. At one point we were, like, marching on highways and long lines, and that was fun. One of the things that I remember noticing is what happens what you have an antiwar demonstration. I mean, here you have all these young women and we're all — it's Florida, and we're all in halter tops and shorts, and the TV cameras are doing good coverage of girls in halter tops and shorts chanting against the war. And the sexism of their selection was so profound and so annoying. I remember seeing signs and posters about that. And going to a meeting and panicking because of the lesbian issue.

I had already had an incident the year before, some stuff that had happened with my family, and I had had one of those moments in which I — it was like somebody grabbed me and shook me and said, "You are not actually like all the other people here. You think you are. You have the scholarship, you're a good student, you're doing really well. But at any moment they could toss you out." Because I had come close to being tossed out because I got hysterical at some meeting.

ANDERSON: What kind of meeting? Do you remember?

ALLISON: Oh, it was the counseling department. My sister had called me. My little sister was — Trouble was happening, and she was out of the house and called me. And I, for a moment, foolishly thought, I can ask these people for help. Which is stupid and I should have known better. Instead, their response was this wave — As soon as I began to hint at the full dimensions of what the problem was — which is, essentially, that my stepfather was after my little sister — they panicked. The mental health people there really didn't know how to deal with it. And so their response was that I was hysterical and that that meant I was not necessarily a good scholarship student. I had been sobbing, and I'm sitting with this woman, and I remember that it suddenly hit me: You're not like these people. Shut up, wipe your face, and get out of here. And cleaning it up as best I could.

5:00

When I went to the women's meeting, I had the same response: These people can afford to talk about this stuff, but I could lose my scholarship and be on the street. So I walked out, then didn't go back. And it's that whole thing of, this is what the middle-class women are going to do, and that's all very well and good, but people like me, no, for three reasons: one, incest; two, violence; and three, being queer. They were not comfortable with lesbians, and so I could have lost my scholarship just to have been revealed as a lesbian, especially since I had been having sex with my resident adviser.

ANDERSON: (laughs)

ALLISON: They almost got me in trouble because I tried to sell waterbeds. If they knew what I was doing on those waterbeds, it would have been all over. So I went back to Orlando after I graduated from college, which is the truck-stop armpit of the world, and didn't — I got a scholarship to

Columbia but not enough money, so I didn't go, and went to work as a salad girl. (laughs)

ANDERSON: In Orlando.

ALLISON: In Orlando, Florida. Tried to figure out what to do, and did not actually walk back into the women's movement until I got the job with the Social Security Administration and got sent to Tallahassee as an employed person.

This is — It's more complicated than that. It has a lot to do with a woman I fell in love with who died, and bad things happened.

ANDERSON: Do you want to tell that story?

ALLISON: She was a junkie, and I was stupid, and I didn't figure out that, possibly, junkies were not a good idea to fall in love with.

ANDERSON: You wrote a story about her.

ALLISON: Yeah, yeah. I loved her a lot. She was profoundly self-destructive, and I was only marginally less so. And when she died, it was lucky that I had already applied, because I had been trying to find work. I was working as a salad girl, a maid. I had been a nanny for a rich couple, and I was in and out of my stepfather's house, which was horrible, involved in a completely destructive relationship.

The job with the Social Security Administration got me out of Orlando, which was smart. About the time I left, about almost everyone I knew got arrested for just basically being part of that whole drug party scene that was in Orlando. I was a (laughs) — I was shy and bookish and read all the time, and queer. So I wasn't actually the kind of — I wasn't into the drugs, except that I dated everybody who was, and my girlfriend was a junkie. So I would have probably gone to jail with the bunch of them.

I was actually a substitute teacher for part of that — semi-respectable. But then I hit Tallahassee. And when I moved to Tallahassee, a gay male friend drove me up there with my stuff, and it was like, Okay, I'm going to clean up. And clean up for me meant that I was going to try not to get involved in any destructive relationships, and that I was going to try to, you know, look at my life and see what I was doing.

I was 22, 23 years old. And the first thing I did was get the student paper. I got an apartment about two blocks from the [Florida State University] Tallahassee campus, got the university paper, and checked to find out what was going on. There was a literary magazine that was being done out of the Women's Center. Now, I did not realize that this magazine was not actually publishing; it was just a notice. I didn't realize how marginal or almost nonexistent a lot of the women's movement and the Women's Center was. I just showed up. I just went

looking for it. And my hidden agenda was to find the other lesbians, because I did not want to find the bar dykes that I had been dating before. I was making a cross-class movement. (laughs)

ANDERSON: So it was really out of finding other women to date versus an intellectual focus –

ALLISON: Finding a community, I think a whole community.

ANDERSON: It was more about the lesbian piece, is what I'm hearing, instead of –

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: (overlapping dialogue)

ALLISON: And the women's movement to a certain extent, because by that time I had read enough stuff that I'm like, This really is about me, or it could be about me. Actually, I think what I felt was, it wasn't about me but it could be about me, because of the class stuff.

ANDERSON: What kind of stuff were you reading? Do you remember?

ALLISON: Oh yes. Early lesbian magazines; so *The Furies*. There was a good alternative bookstore that had everything. The first — what was it called? The first lesbian magazine was the one those girls were doing up in Northampton. I actually sent a story. But just — there was just a huge volume of badly printed broadsides and *On Our Backs*, and all this stuff. And starting to read it, there would be a slice in which, Okay, this is about me. And then there would be the slice, Well, no, it's not. But the Women's Center –

10:00

ANDERSON: So you stumbled into the Women's Center and what did you find?

ALLISON: I went for the magazine meeting, but it had been shifted, and I wound up in a consciousness-raising group, and it literally — everything in my life changed from that moment on. I think that that first night I was there — after that, I think I was there every night for a year. Every time that I was not at work, I was there, or very shortly thereafter.

There was a collective household about a block away, and within three months, I had moved into that household. It's hard to explain, especially now, to young people, because they don't feel it, but it was like being caught in a riptide and picked up and moved forward really fast. Or like having suddenly been hit by light when you've been in a cave. It was just immediate, overwhelming, and, Oh my God, everything makes sense. And, Oh my God, I could do something about this. And the sense of power, of actually being able to do something, was intoxicating, especially since, most of my life, I'd been helpless to

— I just had to ride. And to suddenly grab hold and steer myself was what it felt like.

The consciousness-raising group — two things. I fell in love with the first woman I saw in the room, and, as usual, it was a mistake, because I'm always attracted to the wrong ones. She was a completely obnoxious, withholding butch, but, boy, she looked good in those madras trousers and that white rat catcher shirt. She was flopped down in a beanbag chair, so I positioned myself across the room to watch her. But I don't think I actually registered that much to the other people who were in the room, except that there was an enormous variety of presentation of self, which, for me, is always about class. There were what was clearly a dyke in the beanbag chair, in her riding boots and her rat catcher shirt. And then there were what looked like university secretaries, in their pearls and high heels. And then a woman in a flannel shirt, who was the classic 70s lesbian. She even had the duckbill in the back, and everything.

I think there were about, maybe, 12 women in the room, and they had that whole thing where you pass the — it was a shell. You could only talk if you had the shell. Do you remember how consciousness-raising groups worked? (laughs) I think there might even have been an announced subject, but nobody paid any fucking attention to it. The first woman to speak actually was the director of the Women's Center at the time, and she was drunk, which was a little bit startling to me. And I think it was the second or third woman that spoke that just killed me, because it was one of the secretary-looking women — very well dressed, lots of makeup — took hold of that shell like it was a life raft, and started talking almost immediately about, she needed help because, you know, she looked good, she was in control, everything was working. But she woke up in the middle of the night every night — every fucking night — wanting to get up and go drive to Georgia and kill her father. And then she said why. And no person in my life or anywhere in my imagination had ever said it out loud. I didn't think you could say it loud and still live. And that she was so different from me confounded it. It just changed everything.

There's this thing that happens. I had gotten used to, as a kid, to moving a lot. I was used to the phenomenon of, land in a new place, present yourself. You always have a story. And I played, when I was young, with being different people when we — because we moved every six months or less. So I was used to the present-yourself. I always had a draft of myself, and I designed the story I told about myself for what I wanted — mostly to be taken seriously. But the moment she started talking, the self that I had been preparing to present, which was about looking good to that woman in that beanbag chair, disappeared. Everything disappeared, and it was like, I am not ready to talk about this, but I'm going to keep coming back and figure out how to talk about this, and how to make a difference.

ANDERSON: How long did it take before you were able to talk about it in that group?

ALLISON: Whew! Well, probably about the same time I started sleeping with the girl in the beanbag chair. A couple weeks, not long, not long. Although the way I talked about it was very careful, very careful.

ANDERSON: What were you censoring?

ALLISON: How complicated incest really is. I was actually censoring who I was, trying to present as middle class, because I had a college education and I didn't want to be my mother or my sisters, and doing fairly — what I thought was a fairly good job of presenting as middle class. I had a job with the Social Security Administration. I did not wear high heels, but still, I could look like a secretary, and I was trying.

15:00

It would be three years before I would ever really get to the place where I was talking nakedly. And it would be a decade before I could really — before that stuff all cracked and I could really look at it and talk about it frankly. There was just no language. And all the stuff that was deeply complicated about — was impossible to talk about quickly. Sometimes you have to wait for the culture to catch up with you.

The thing that nearly destroyed me, both as a kid and as a young adult, was that being raped could provoke a sexual response, and that you could eroticize violence, which is exactly how I survived. I understand a lot of it now — I'm 58 years old — but I did not understand it back then, and I could not have articulated it. But it does inculcate an enormous amount of self-hatred, and that's dangerous to talk about.

And even when you can talk about it, I talked about it in very structured, abbreviated ways. And let's be frank, the early women's movement was a movement of slogans and simplicity, and I was not simple and I hated slogans.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Yeah. But you still broke the silence for the first time around (inaudible) that CR group.

ALLISON: And that's, I think, what triggers a lot of energy and empowerment, and then the long, slow process of actually sorting through all that stuff and starting to make changes in your life. That takes a lot —

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: A lot. The women's movement was ready for a lot of what I was ready for, but there were some things I was ready for that the women's movement was not yet ready for. (laughs)

ANDERSON: I'm sure that's still true. So it sounds also like, in terms of the group makeup, that there was no stigma around butch-femme.

ALLISON: Oh yes there was.

ANDERSON: Okay, because some people would describe a CR group in the early 70s as strictly 70s flannel lesbian, without any secretaries.

ALLISON: But you're talking about where it was. It was Tallahassee, Florida, not New York City, not San Francisco. But I also pretty quickly — A lot of the women that were at the Women's Center were sexually completely uninteresting to me. Flannel lesbians were not where my imagination went. The women who were sexually interesting me were older and more dangerous, and they tended to be old-school butches, and they tended to be drunks or drug addicts.

ANDERSON: And they didn't go to the Women's Center, did they?

ALLISON: No, they did not. When I moved there, I had made this decision: I'm not going to do that anymore. I'm not going to go to a Trailways, or the bar near the Trailways, and meet them. No, no more. I'm going to be good. But you can't be good. You lose your mind, because the people — there is no way to talk about this in any clean fashion, so I will trust you to manage this material — but they can't fuck you. These clean, respectable, academic middle-class girls can't fuck you right.

ANDERSON: Did you try?

ALLISON: Fuck yeah. I even tried training them. But the only ones that would work tended to be genuinely dangerous: drug addicts, alcoholics, people with their own issues of violence. But you could date old-school butches, and they didn't have any — you know, they could be even not drunk and not alcoholic and not drug addicts and semi-sane, and still know how to make a girl feel right, you know?

So I did the same thing I've done everywhere I've ever lived. I did these two parallel existences, so that I was at the Women's Center what seemed like all the time. I don't think I slept much. I got involved in the university, in the alternative program to the anthropology department there. The anthropology department at Florida State sucked, and it was just completely patronizing, run by a couple of good old boys who were being paid a dollar a year and were not referred to as *professor*, but as *colonel*. I mean, it was that ridiculous, really ridiculous.

ANDERSON: You were just doing some post-BA coursework, or something?

ALLISON: Yeah. I was thinking about going into the program and studying osteology, because I was fascinated with bones, but who could go to school in a completely patronizing, obnoxious — So instead we invented an alternative program, a critique of the science of man, and started teaching radical anthropology classes, and that was fun. That was another thing.

But then a couple nights a week, I'd go to the pool hall and pick up girls — *good* girls. And always get in trouble, because the problem with old-school butches is that they're always looking for a femme to marry. Now the thing you need to remember is that this was also the heyday of sexual liberation and non-monogamy and experimentation, and that hit the women's community as fully as it hit the heterosexual community. And there was a concept of militant non-monogamy and, boy, I loved militant non-monogamy.

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ANDERSON: Did that work for you?

ALLISON: It worked for me. It worked for me for most of my life, because I did not want to be — I didn't want to marry. I didn't want to marry (inaudible). I just wanted to fuck a lot and be safe, and for me being safe was being able to send them home, or go home and lock the door. I had to have absolute control (laughs), and so I constructed it. But it got very, very complicated, more complicated after I did move into the lesbian feminist collective which we founded.

ANDERSON: Yeah, I bet. I bet they didn't like your dates.

ALLISON: Well, they were fascinated by my dates.

ANDERSON: Did you bring them home?

ALLISON: I did every now and again, and there were parties. I would be invited to parties, and some of the women from my collective would go. It was a little bit — it was just like the class stuff, and that was a big part of it. It was a big thing about class, because most of the butches that I found sexually interesting were working class, and they were rough trade. Most of them were older and working, and they had a kind of contempt for women's-movement lesbians. You know, You *girls*. And it was very butch, and it was a butch-femme prejudice, because while —

(break in tape)

— a lot of women's-movement lesbians presented androgynously — flannel shirts, boots. Everybody wears flannel shirts and boots, but I got a lace teddy under my flannel shirt, so I can signal femme. But the women from — the older butch women just didn't — couldn't read the signals, and really didn't approve, and the women's movement didn't approve of the old school. So the antagonism was mutual.

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ANDERSON: Right. And there you are in the middle?

ALLISON: Yes, yes.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So how did you make sense of it?

ALLISON: I fucked and was ashamed, which, you know, is a life pattern. I was used to it. I knew how to do that. And kept getting in complicated, horrific relationships that broke up badly. Lots of dyke drama. My collective was uncomfortable but amused, but also you could — it was a point in which there was a whole lot of — people were actually trying to be radical. You wanted to be radical, so that when I would get shit about it, I could respond by being more radical and accuse the women's-movement lesbians of being prejudiced against genuine, real lesbians, dykes, you know.

ANDERSON: Because you were really living out that polyamorous —

ALLISON: Sort of.

ANDERSON: Sort of.

ALLISON: Everybody was.

ANDERSON: Did you talk about class where you were living?

ALLISON: Well, talked about but didn't actually do much about it. It's very hard to — There's a lot of lip service and not much substance. I became director of the Women's Center and did a lot of things I can barely even explain, but I can remember being on local radio and TV, and having the women in my collective dress me, literally. Pick out the clothes I would wear. The committee would meet, and I would go talk, but they would groom me before I would go to talk, and it was all about presentation as middle class, although I could not have said that at the time. I just knew that I did not have the right clothes, nor know how to pick them out. Nor know how to buy them, which is something that I learned by dating middle-class girls. But to articulate that, no. Not until we went up to Sagaris [Institute], and by that time, our lesbian collective had — I think of it as boiling soup. It boiled at such a rate that it boiled off people who were not ready to become more and more radical, and so they shifted out of the collective.

After about a year and a half, we were all identifying as radical lesbian feminists, and we were all separatists — our distance from the straight male community was pretty profound — and doing a lot of social action, a lot of demonstrations. There was still the march for the ERA [equal rights amendment]. A lot of my stuff was centered on the Tallahassee campus, which was central to Tallahassee itself, because it

was — you could walk from the campus to the capitol building, and we did frequently, with hundreds of us, and banners, and demonstrating for everything from the ERA to trying to get services on campus: childcare, rape crisis, the early antiviolence movement, peer counseling. There was a lot of emphasis on peer counseling because this was still back when lesbians and queers were — you were crazy. And it was still that old thing that had hit me when I was in college, which was, if you identify as a lesbian, you become a pervert.

ANDERSON: So how did they let you become the director of the Women's Center, then, when there was so much fear around lesbianism?

ALLISON: Well, because, essentially, we were really good. (laughs) We were very calculated and good. Because, in fact, they were — *they*. Well, who is *they* I am talking about? They, the university administration. They, the local newspaper people, and then the radical newspaper people, because, remember, there's a whole alternative culture, and the alternative culture is actually nervous about being prejudiced against — They're actually trying to respect women's rights. They're uncomfortable with lesbians, but they can't say they can't stand you because that would be prejudice. But they can't stand you and they're afraid of you, so you have to manipulate it, and we were pretty good at that. And then you'd dance back and forth about whether you're queer or not.

ANDERSON: So you would still pass as straight and middle class.

ALLISON: To a certain extent, although as time went on, we became more and more — I mean, I can remember when I started wearing my dyke t-shirt and putting your dyke bumper stickers on your car and getting your car defaced and smashed. It was just a constant struggle.

If your life feels at threat, it seems to me, then you can back up and smile at the boy. I've been a waitress, I knew how to — Humor is really, really useful. It was always something, I could never — I always got in trouble with, because they would be so serious. But I had been trained by my mother, from the age of 15, as a waitress, and waitresses survive by humor, and you can manipulate and control a lot of situations that will quickly get dangerous.

So I had all those instincts and training, and these girls did not. The middle class is poorly brought up. They're just not trained for survival. And they would do things that I thought you — that would risk my life. When we tried to do the waitress union is one of the times when it really hit me.

ANDERSON: How so?

ALLISON: I really believed in the waitress union, but I was — We would cycle in who was director and who was not, at the Women's Center. I think at the time that we started the action to organize the waitress union, I

5:00

wasn't actually the titular head of the Women's Center. Somebody else had the official position, because to have that position you had to be a student, and it was a work-study position. I was not genuinely a student more than a couple of semesters, but I was actually doing all the work.

And within the collective, we did not actually — There were the rules that you had to follow for the university, the rules that you had to follow for a nonprofit organization in the state of Florida, and then there was how we really did things. We were very comfortable with having a fiction for the university and a fiction for the state and a fiction for the cops, and the reality. We were pragmatic, and I believed in pragmatic organizing, and I still do.

There was an attempt to organize the waitress union. It was the first time, really, that there was any outreach to the women of color in Tallahassee — hugely segregated city. But I had been a waitress — that's how I got through college — and I always knew that that's where I would have to go back. So I believed in the waitress union, and I was really pushing for it.

I think in part I got the Women's Center invested in it because I had pushed for it. And it blew up completely because, in fact, the university threatened to shut the Women's Center down. Now there was a lot of stuff that we had done that they had let slide, but that union-organizing effort — they were going to shut the Women's Center down. We had to pull it out of the Women's Center or lose the Women's Center.

And that was one of the times when I thought, Okay, class is the biggie here, because that's exact — You know, all this other stuff — rape crisis, childcare — now, these are cross-class issues. But when you talk about a waitress union, you're talking about a working-class issue, and you're talking about working with black women, and that was where both the university administration and a lot of people in the Women's Center panicked.

And that was when we started Herstore [Feminist Bookstore]. (laughs) Because we needed an institution outside the university that could continue to do things. I got involved in organizing Herstore — one, I wanted a feminist bookstore because I wanted a feminist community center that wasn't based in the university and that could do things that the university would never let us do — in part, the waitress union.

We got the store, but the waitress union collapsed completely, in part because of color, because we couldn't make that reach into the black women's community. It was 1973–74, and it was mean. It was an education to me. I was dating a black woman. My collective was not comfortable with that either. They lived in a different world. Even though we were living in the same big old house — 12 bedrooms — we were living in a different world.

But I didn't learn how to talk about it until I went up to Sagaris, and Sagaris was a feminist training institute that was held up in Middlebury, Vermont.

ANDERSON: I love the story you write about the Bertha Harris workshop.

ALLISON: Oh, it was a great workshop, but it was a great program. It really was designed to be a feminist training ground, and the women that ran it — put it together — just did a remarkable thing, and they caught a lot of hell for it. It was another one of those feminist projects that blew up completely. There were two sessions — it was over a summer — two one-week programs, and I signed up for the writing program with Bertha Harris. But there were organizing classes with Charlotte Bunch and Rita Mae Brown and Ti-Grace Atkinson, and just amazing women. Florence, what's her name?

ANDERSON: Kennedy?

ALLISON: Yeah. God, amazing people were there, and a lot of socialist women who I'd never heard of that I met there, old lefties who were sort of women's movement and sort of, We're going to use the women's movement. Remarkable, and a wonderful, wonderful immersion.

And they were talking about class. And they were talking about class in a more serious, connected-to-your-real-life-everyday-life — which was at a distance from talking about — You can talk about theory, and the women's movement talk theory about class really well, and we did that in Tallahassee. We could talk theory. But up in Vermont, all of a sudden that dorm, with people talking about language and what made you uncomfortable. And all of a sudden it was like another light came on in the room, and I could see another corner that I hadn't really been paying much attention to, but which I had been dealing with for years.

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But all of a sudden it's like all of these points where I panic, where I back up, where I start pretending and hiding, almost all of these are class-based or incest-based sex stuff. That deep sense of shame that I was born with, I did not actually have to continue to carry. I could actually use it to batter the people about me, and I did. (laughs) Which is, of course, the hard and tricky part.

ANDERSON: Can you talk more about the politics of race too, within the — I'm interested in terms of your describing the Women's Center, the collective, the different organizations that you were a part of in Florida. It sounds like these are mostly white groups.

ALLISON: Almost entirely white. Well, presenting as middle class, even when it wasn't middle class.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So how race was talked about, and how you — your understanding of race and being able to date a black woman, being able to organize the black women in the waitress union. How your understanding of race was challenged, shifted, evolved during that time.

ALLISON: Being profoundly uncomfortable all the time, and being wrong all the time, is a really hard place to work from, but if you're a white woman in the South in 1973, that's where you are. You're trying to do any kind of community organizing. Oh man, even to put together a program — a concert, a reading, any kind of social, cultural program. If you're really attempting to pull together all the women in Tallahassee, then you're pulling from all the communities. That means you're trying to do outreach into a black community that trusts you not at all, and has every reason not to trust you, and you're ignorant and you're stupid. You know you're racist, and you're ashamed every moment. It was the most profoundly uncomfortable I've ever been, and I kept fucking up.

The difference is this. If you keep fucking up and you just keep saying, "I'm sorry, that was really stupid," and back to begin again, then you can do some work. But most people don't say, I'm sorry, that was stupid and keep (inaudible). And a couple of times —

One of the reasons that I moved more and more into Herstore and out of the university was the women in the Women's Center in the university, when they would screw up and be called on it, they would avoid doing things again, in order to not be that uncomfortable. But I really wanted a waitress union. I really wanted it. And I wanted not to be ashamed. The struggle not to be ashamed. It also helps to sleep with people, because that kind of intimacy — you can establish some trust that will let you screw up and forgive each other. Not always, not always.

ANDERSON: It must have been full of obstacles and challenges, though, an interracial relationship in the 70s.

ALLISON: Yeah, although remember, I never did relationships. I just slept around a lot, so that I never had, like, a lover, and the few times I did, I broke it up pretty fast. Let's be real. What is exotic? I mean, I knew women that would date me because I was exotic, because I was white trash and rough in bed, and all that kind of stuff, and I did the same thing with black women. They were exotic, and so I would date them. Also, because then you were like, you're more radical than thou. Don't we ever lose track of how valuable it is to be more radical than thou. I did a lot of that.

ANDERSON: What was your understanding of yourself around femme and gendered aspects of lesbian identity?

ALLISON: Oh, a failed femme.

ANDERSON: Did you think of yourself that way?

ALLISON: Oh sure, because to be a women's-movement femme was to be a failed femme, because I was dating women who didn't think I was femme

enough, and I wasn't femme enough by their standard. I didn't wear high heels and girdles and do the intense makeup. I really was on this borderline, which a lot of us were. Androgyny was really more comfortable.

I can look at it now, and look at my androgyny, and it was very femme, but it wasn't the spectacular femme of the working-class culture, and it wasn't the classy femme of the black women's culture. That butch-femme scared the bejesus out of me, because I just could not carry all the markers. You know Amber Hollibaugh?

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ANDERSON: Yes.

ALLISON: Well, Amber was a successful working-class femme, but I was an intellectual working-class femme, which is a failed femme. So always knowing that I'm a failed femme, I had to be much better in bed and much more aggressive in bed, and that works for a certain kind of femme, my kind of femme, which is, of course, really ridiculous because that's not what I really wanted in bed, but that's what I did to get what I wanted. Oy vey!

But I was always feeling wrong. You can get very, very comfortable in the position of knowing that you are wrong — or I got very, very comfortable with feeling like I was always wrong on some level and thinking, Okay, I'll learn as I go along, and I'll get better. There's something about being raised in the Baptist church and being willing to say, "Take me as I am. I'll get better," that a lot of the women I hung out with and worked with didn't seem to have. Poor babies.

Also, being willing to be punished is something that I don't think people actually understand. I was willing to be treated with contempt. I was used to treating myself with contempt, so that I was willing to be in working relationships with black women and be wrong and be treated with contempt and still come back. I was used to it. People who are not used to it have a problem, or who can't make peace with it, because it's all about — It doesn't last that long, the part where you're completely wrong, because then you're doing some work.

Don't lose track of what was really going on, is that we were all doing major work, from, literally, the physical work of putting together a store from nothing — building shelves, cadging old paint, literally making a habitable space. There's an enormous amount of physical labor involved in that. Lack of sleep, showing up on time, coming back and doing stuff — all of that is happening in the context of, you're all talking feminism and theory and discussing your life and flirting and screwing around, but it is all in the context of doing work. And so long as the work is getting done, a lot of that stuff is of less importance.

And being accused of being racist — I was racist, and I could say, "Okay, yes, but right now we have to build these shelves." And I was the kind of person who showed up and built shelves. I was the kind of person who just — I was a worker. Never lose track, that constructed

a lot, and you build relationships of trust being a worker. That goes across class and it goes across color. It blows up because, then, of course, there will be somebody who wants to be running things and powerful and famous, and they don't tend always to be workers. They tend to be really good talkers, and that can fuck you up and blow a whole community, and that happened over and over again. Then those of us who were workers, we would just continue.

I was willing to be a foot soldier in the women's army. I suppose that's the way to talk about it. So that I didn't need to be the director. And I was used to setting aside my personal desires and interests in the service of something I believed in. It's a little bit like becoming a nun. There's a whole lot of stuff I was willing to give up if it seemed to me that we were actually going to manage to change something and make a difference.

ANDERSON: What did you give up?

ALLISON: My writing. Writing went first, because personal — (chuckles) It's funny. In a movement whose motto was *The personal is the political*, you had to give up a lot of personal stuff. Being in relationships with the kind of women that I felt genuinely sexually exciting. I either had to limit those — narrow those down — or hide them, to be successfully active in the more socially acceptable women's movement. Leading a parallel life, presenting as middle class. Yeah. And not even thinking about it, just doing it, in order to get the work done. And the work was important enough to me.

Or to have all of your work erased. I can't tell you how many projects that I just nearly killed myself, literally going for weeks and weeks and weeks without enough sleep; building shelves; or writing the proposal or doing all the phone calls, all that crap, going to all those meetings, and then, at the last minute just being eliminated, and having all of your work be attributed to somebody else.

It hit me really strongly after I moved up to Washington, D.C., and went back to Tallahassee, and all these projects that I and some other woman had begun were continuing, but that we had begun them was completely gone. Our names were gone, any memory that we had done the work was gone. Even books that I had donated. My donation paper — they tore the nameplates out of the books. The erasure was so amazing.

Some of it was about, there was an enormous amount of fighting between left political groups, like socialist women's groups and Trotskyites, and I never gave a shit about any of that. And they were viciously fighting all the time about who was running things, and I thought, What's the point of all this crap? You know? I don't care. So I ignored it. And then you go back and you discover that the Trotskyite group swept in for seven months and changed the name of everything, and even changed the incorporation papers on some things that we had done so that we were erased.

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ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: And there was a huge fight about the women's health movement in Florida.

ANDERSON: Why don't you say more about that?

ALLISON: Oy vey, oy vey. Abortion was illegal; it was a huge fight. You had to go to New York to get an abortion, where it was legal. There was an underground railroad. (laughs) A lot of that kind of thing requires money. To get money, you have to do events or organize, and that's a lot of what we were doing. We were constantly raising money — either asking people for money on a donation basis or finding something to sell.

ANDERSON: Sort of an emergency abortion fund.

ALLISON: Well, an underground — yeah, and phone trees. And not only a lot of this was illegal, a lot of it was not being prosecuted, so you could do a whole lot of stuff and you were not really at risk, but every once in a while you were at risk and every once in a while — There was a Northeast connection — was it Jane [the Abortion Counseling Service of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union]? I can't remember.

ANDERSON: (inaudible)

ALLISON: Right, right, and you could funnel into that, and we had a Southeast connection. So, just to provide those services.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: But a lot of the people — It was safer in some ways to be organizing something with people you were sleeping with because you pretty much knew who you could trust and what their nefarious intentions were. *Nefarious* is a poor choice of words, but some people wanted attention, and some people wanted to get this girl's attention, and some people were after a job. You know, everybody had another thing they were accomplishing. I didn't ever care about that; I understood it. But I didn't always understand some of the infighting between some of the political sections, especially some of them that had existed before I hit Tallahassee and who I was not intimate with.

So when the women's health movement — there were three things. One, there was the abortion connection, and that was fairly clean because it was illegal and endangered, and people were careful. Then there was this women's health movement that was all about menstrual cycles, speculums, looking at your pussies, which was fun

and social, and the fact that menstrual extraction was actually an abortion technique. We all had to learn how to do menstrual extraction.

ANDERSON: So you learned how to do that?

ALLISON: I did my first menstrual extraction on a pool table in my collective, yes, with 20 women around the pool table watching this process — me and my girlfriend. Have you ever done menstrual —

ANDERSON: No, why don't you —

ALLISON: Aaah, (laughs) Jesus Christ. What they do now, I don't know, but back then — there's a glass-enclosed thing with two tubes, so it created a vacuum. And then you ran a tube and you put a cannula, and you put it up your pussy and you created a vacuum, and it literally extracted. Now, let me explain to you, this is an abortion. They had said it was not an abortion; that all we were really removing was, you're actually having your period in an hour instead of three days. But it's an abortion, and we knew that it was an abortion technique, and that is, in fact, part of the subtext of what we were doing. We were sharing information about how to do your own abortions, which was, of course, illegal. But meanwhile, we were all talking about, This is empowering you; you get to control your body, your own life; a lot of saying — But meanwhile, it hurts.

ANDERSON: And you did this on a pool table?

ALLISON: I did this on a pool table with people watching. This was one of the more excruciating experiences of my life, while trying to pretend that it is not hurting, and being somewhat cagey about what was really involved.

Then it turned out that getting the glass tubes and the cannulas, and all of this stuff — it was hard to get, and it was expensive. There were some women who put together a service. I'm forgetting the woman's name. A woman came from California, trained us in the technique, but then we had to buy the material, and you, really, at that point, had to have either a nurse or a doctor's license to acquire some of the medical equipment.

A woman put together a program where she was providing the materials, so she started the women's health project or — I've even forgotten what it's called, and I've forgotten her name, but she was a socialist feminist, and she was into that old school — She really just wanted — she was going to raise money, she was going to sell it for enough money, and she was also going to control who controlled women's health in Florida.

It became a huge fight. And somewhere in the middle of that, phone calls were made, and people were reported for having done these things. Some of these people were in the university system, and they

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were fragile. They could get in both legal and social trouble. You just suddenly were not — you were not going to get your job next year. Some of that was ruthless.

ANDERSON: Were you reported?

ALLISON: I wasn't employed there. I was employed, first, for the Social Security Administration, and then, when I developed a bleeding ulcer, I became an assistant in a photo studio. So I was not at risk.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: So I wasn't one of the people that got targeted. I think I did — The cops came to interview me at one point. I thought they were interviewing me because of other stuff I was doing. It was only years later that I found out it was actually connected to the whole health project thing.

ANDERSON: Were the black women part of that?

ALLISON: No, no, no. They were not willing to climb up on a pool table with a bunch of white women staring at their pussies. There were black women who were doing it, but they were doing it — they weren't in the university.

The black women in the university were not participating in the particular section of things that I was doing. There were black women on the board, and there were black women who came, but Tallahassee was so divided. You have to remember that a lot of the university women are black women from out of town, and we were trying really hard to reach into the black women's community in town. That tends to be more working class, and that tends to fail. It did fail spectacularly.

ANDERSON: What happened to your collective?

ALLISON: Oh goodness, goodness, goodness.

ANDERSON: How did it blow up? I'm assuming that it did. Maybe it didn't.

ALLISON: Over a series of things. Over the heterosexual lesbian issue at one point, and I actually think that we became fairly obnoxious to the heterosexual women who were in the collective, pretty much drove them out.

ANDERSON: They were a minority?

ALLISON: They were a minority in that particular group. Some of them, I'm just ashamed of myself because — yeah. And then, let us be very frank. Lesbians sleep with each other, lesbians break up, lesbians stop speaking. It really fucks a collective up when people are sleeping and

breaking up and fighting, and that happened repeatedly and repeatedly. And we had CR and consciousness-raising, and you can use CR and consciousness-raising to fuck people over. You do criticism, self-criticism. I got criticized because I was bringing rough trade back into the house, and I would be criticized for the noises coming out of my room, and I'm like, You know, I'm getting some and you're not, bitch. This was nasty.

Although when we finally left, Morgan and Flo and I, we left the big collective and went off to found a smaller collective. Some of it was about class. I was doing a lot more talking and confrontation about class. And let's be frank, Morgan and Flo and I were all lovers, off and on, over years. (laughs) Oy vey.

ANDERSON: As a trio?

ALLISON: We didn't do threesomes. We would take turns and, you know, that's about power and control. Morgan always tended to be in control. She was very butch with her rat catcher blouse. She changed clothes after a while, but she kept the boots. She became a photographer.

ANDERSON: Oh, Gwenwald.

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Is that Morgan Gwenwald?

ALLISON: Yeah, yeah. And it wasn't Morgan. Her name was Judith Jones, and her family lived there. I loved her dearly and we fought horrifically, and it blew up largely about that.

So we went off and formed — and we actually were more — we wanted to be more serious about collective living, because, let's be frank, this collective that we established as a lesbian collective was largely an activist collective — the big one — and there were essentially 12 women because there were 12 bedrooms. Then there got to be more because some women were two to a room. But we were an activist collective. We were people who put on events, we sponsored marches. We were the ones that were painting banners and holding yard sales and bake sales to, you know, get the paint to make posters, and all that kind of basic organizing.

ANDERSON: Right.

ALLISON: But we were not sharing resources. Some women, most of them were middle class. They were there on their daddy's dime at the university. In the collective, there were four of us who were not in-students and who had jobs, and would cycle — I would cycle on and off unemployment and having a job, and we tended — we were mostly the working-class women, and we tended to be the ones who were always

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gainfully employed, and we were always paying for shit. And after a while it's like, There's something wrong here. I'm working really hard and your daddy is sending you a check. You know that fight? So we decided to make a real collective and pool resources — one bank account.

ANDERSON: And you're all from working-class backgrounds?

ALLISON: No.

ANDERSON: No.

ALLISON: I was the only working — Well, Flo never identified as working class. Her daddy owned a motel. You know, she was raised with a working-class ethos and had that mentality, but we wouldn't articulate it enough to say that. She thought of herself as middle class, but she wasn't. Morgan was. Daddy was a professor, sent her to a psychiatrist when she was, like, 12 or 13. That's a clue: if they've got enough money to send you to a psychiatrist.

The three of us went off and formed a living collective, and articulated that it was a chosen family, a chosen lesbian collective family, and we did that for many years and shared resources. It still was always the case that I always had a job. (laughs)

ANDERSON: And you were all still lovers off and on?

ALLISON: Off and on, although mostly after a while not.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So you're still supporting them.

ALLISON: To a certain extent, yeah, but Morgan could always go to her daddy when things got bad enough. Flo, no. Her family had no real resources, but she was so pretty and she could always, you know, we'd always take good care of Flo.

But then we formed that collective, and then we kept getting in trouble. We moved into a real working-class community, because we could get a cheap house at a long distance from the university, and wound up having a series of run-ins with our neighbors, who disapproved of us profoundly, both as feminists and as lesbians, and they were separate issues but overlapped to a certain extent. And then this guy came to the door with a shotgun one night and it was like, Okay, we've got to get out of here. So we moved. And then that coincided with Sagaris. We went up to Sagaris that summer.

ANDERSON: About '75?

ALLISON: Was it '75? Yeah.

ANDERSON: '74, '75, '76?

ALLISON: Yeah, '75. Morgan stayed for the second session of Sagaris. Flo and I went back and got more and more violent threats and harassment in that neighborhood, and we had to get out. We wound up making the sudden decision to move to Washington, D.C.

I can't remember all of why that happened, although I got offered a gig with Charlotte Bunch and *Quest* and George Washington University. Charlotte Bunch was teaching a feminism class, and I was invited to come co-teach it with her, some of which I didn't understand why. I knew I was articulate, and I knew I could write, but I didn't understand why she invited me. I understood more after a while, because, in fact, she wanted to pair with a working-class woman, and articulated some of that.

It was an interesting and fascinating thing to do, but then we shifted to D.C. and continued. We found a house. We still pooled all resources, and it was much easier. I'd been poor all my life, and all of a sudden, I had a kind of a family. You could never ask my mother for money, she never had any, but Morgan could ask her daddy for money, and there was just an access to resources and things. It was an interesting education in class, being part of that kind of a chosen family. We were very articulate about it. We proselytized, and we proselytized for non-monogamy, even when we were basically serial monogamists at different points.

ANDERSON: But it gave you a safety net.

ALLISON: It gave me a huge safety net — huge — and a family. You know, my family is — I wanted a family even in ways that I don't think I could have articulated. I wanted a real family, the way people talked about family. I couldn't even look at the way in which my family was real. I could always look at the way in which it had failed utterly, but I still loved them, and I wanted that. I wanted that in a women's movement model.

So we worked really hard at being family for each other, with resources, emotionally, being physically present for each other, and to a large extent, being our reference point, sharing history. History gets erased or rewritten or re-presented. I told you, you present a story — you move to a new community and you present the story of who you are. But if you live in a collective, there are people who know who you are and you have a shared history, and what you do has meaning in that shared history.

It was very, very powerful, and I loved them a lot, even when we fought almost all the time and had really different interests and goals in life in some ways, in the context of still wanting — we wanted a feminist revolution. I wanted it like a lover. I wanted it like justice. And believing in a form of justice and believing that the women's movement could make possible justice, that's the part — it's so hard to

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talk about, and it's hard to talk about the emotional-spiritual connection of imagining justice, of imagining a world in which you are not an animal. Very hard. Even middle-class girls in the 50s were raised as animals. There was a way in which men were real and women were not.

It's hard to explain to young people today the impact of suddenly seeing yourself as a person with a soul. And they don't believe it, but you really — you grow up poor, or even grow up middle class, and grow up in a family where you're always being told what to do, and have no imagination of your life that isn't in service to someone else. You're not allowed to imagine your life as a real person. You're not a real person, you're a thing or an animal.

The women's movement for me was almost religious because it articulated that we were not animals; that we were beings with souls and our own lives. And that we had to work so hard to establish a sense of our lives is almost very difficult to explain to young women today. That world we made for them, about that I have no doubt. But they don't understand that it could be taken away from them. It sometimes scares the bejesus out of me.

ANDERSON: Yeah. This is where we started, where you articulated it (inaudible), though they do not acknowledge it, the world has been remade in the last 30 years.

ALLISON: And that there is a force that is always trying to shift it back.

ANDERSON: And they don't see that.

ALLISON: They'll see it sometimes. You talk to young people on campus and they'll talk about religion, fundamentalist religion — either Christian or Muslim — which, in fact, is all about contempt for the female and it's about control of the female. You know, that goes right back to what we were fighting in the early women's movement, but they're having to, again, see something that they don't know how to see, because they can't imagine it. It's a little bit like — Go read Margaret Atwood's —

ANDERSON: *The Handmaid's Tale*?

ALLISON: Yeah, and look at that world. That is the world that, there is really a strong (sighs) component, wants to establish. Even the best, best men I knew as a girl, did not think it a sin the way women were being treated, did not think it a crime. I remember the shock when I met a feminist heterosexual man. I remember my first one. He was my karate instructor.

ANDERSON: You wrote a story about that.

ALLISON: And I remember thinking about him and not being able to believe in him. I think part of the reason I kept going back was to believe in this man. It broke all of my separatist stuff pretty strongly.

ANDERSON: I think we're ready to pause there, and we'll pick up with the separatism when we turn over the tape. It's flashing.

38:50

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ANDERSON: Let's start with — well, do you want to say a little bit more about when you lived at Sagaris?

ALLISON: Sagaris.

ANDERSON: Do you want to say anything more about — I mean, it seems like that was a pivotal moment for you in terms of your writing.

ALLISON: In terms of a lot of things. Yes, in terms of writing, yes.

ANDERSON: When you started to take that back up at that time in your life. You said that was one of the things you had to give up. Was that a turning point for taking it back?

ALLISON: It opened up territory to — I was moving to a place where I wanted to write more about my family, but that was not the kind of writing that people were doing. A lot of the early women's movement writing — there was a world of bad poetry, and I can write bad poetry like anybody else, but you were supposed to write about yourself as a woman, and I was interested in the women of my family, but very complicated, embattled about it. You know, that takes a long time to sort out. And not willing to be as frank on the page as I became later. You have to learn how to say things and how to be in the world with that kind of articulated family history. (chuckles)

And there was lots of stuff happening in terms of my sisters, because my sisters carried on the family tradition of having bastard children. One of the things that happens if you're the first person in your family to go to college is that the family breaks, and mine broke. They were very uncomfortable with me, and I was uncomfortable with them. I did not help. I was afraid of them in many ways.

I used to think of my family like locusts. Not my immediate — my sisters and my mother — so much as all my cousins, uncles, and aunts, because that was my experience as a kid. After we moved to Florida, my family would — they would show up in a big old truck full of kids, and eat us out of house and home, and steal everything. It's not even — (sighs) You know, I can remember when they would leave, and my mom would go through house and say, "Well, the tools are gone and the sheets are gone, clothes are gone." But they had nothing and we had a little more. So I thought of them as locusts.

After I left home and moved to Tallahassee, one of the agreements I made with my mother was that she would never give my address to anyone in the family, because I didn't want the locusts to descend, especially now, after I was living in the lesbian feminist collective, because that would be a little awkward. And then my sister visited at one point, and she was pretty much fascinated and horrified by the lesbian feminist collective. It was like, You take all this seriously?

Yeah. And then the whole concept of this lesbian collective, this lesbian family that I was creating. My sister June particularly was like, What the fuck are you talking about? These aren't your family. Now in a way she was right, and in a way she was wrong, but it was very threatening and scary.

ANDERSON: And you were moving out of your class background, or had the potential to.

ALLISON: Yeah, I had. I had, for a while, my respectable job and a series of semi-respectable jobs, at least by comparison to my family.

ANDERSON: And an education.

ALLISON: Yeah, and reading. I mean, this is the other thing. I loved books and I read all the time, and — The movement of writers, the early women's movement was a movement of writers. So novels and theory and political theory and social analysis, and I was an anthropologist. All of that stuff, it was like making sense of the world. The world began to make sense in an articulated, beautiful, complicated, evil sense, you know?

It would be nice to say that things happen because of — no. Things happen because people are organizing for their own survival and their own protection, and the rich do it very well, and societies are constructed pragmatically. Feminism gave me a whole lot of information, and a way to look at the world that made sense. Anthropology gave me some other tools, and you put the two of them together and read a lot, and the world is fascinating. It's mean, but it's fascinating. It didn't show me how to change my own life so much as it showed me some of the things that would make me feel less like a monster.

I think that's the other thing that came out of the early women's movement. The isolation — it just ended the isolation. You were not just one woman whose lover would never do the dishes or would never do the laundry. This is a social pattern, and that you can — it makes a big difference.

But I was always interested in what people don't talk about, which is what you're afraid of and how do you pay for shit. But nobody ever talked about how you paid for stuff and what you're really afraid of. Some of the women's movement did.

When I moved to Washington, D.C., I went to work at *Quest*, which was an early feminist magazine. That, too, was Institute for Policy Studies girls.

ANDERSON: Charlotte Bunch.

ALLISON: Yeah, and Nancy Hartsock, Bev Fisher, some amazing women, and a certain number of professors from George Washington University and

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also from — it's over in Baltimore — Johns Hopkins. Now, most of those women were very well off. They had their niche and about half of them were heterosexual and were married and had family money. Then there were people like me and Bev Fisher, who were itinerant lesbians essentially. It took me a long time to figure out that there were people who were career building, and then there people like Bev and me, who were, like, running the magazine and cycling on and off of unemployment, and basically with very few resources.

If I hadn't been living in the lesbian collective, I would have starved doing the work I was doing and never earning any money. But we never really talked about that some of them were building tenure and building a career in publishing books; and then some of us were doing all of the foot soldier work and getting no attention, getting only the satisfaction of the work we were doing, and feeling like we were making a revolution, but some of the revolutionaries were prospering. (laughs)

ANDERSON: There's a huge division, the professionalization that happens. A huge difference.

ALLISON: Ooooh, God, especially the women's studies. I mean, I actually worked with the women's studies community in Tallahassee briefly, and down there it just made me pissed off, because we had been running these independent classes, but now they were going to get credit and get paid for what we'd been doing for free. That's very annoying. Also, I really found out a lot of the women's studies people were really very conservative and they could — they were not just passing, they were essentially conservative, and they established fairly conservative programs. They would bring in the radicals for a flash, but they didn't really want you.

ANDERSON: That's so true.

ALLISON: And same thing with lesbians. They would bring in the lesbians, but they didn't want lesbians in the department. Or if it was a lesbian, it had to be a particular kind of lesbian who was not confrontational and who could pass.

ANDERSON: Not your kind?

ALLISON: No, no. Didn't even date that kind, so it wouldn't have worked out well.

ANDERSON: So tell me about *Quest*.

ALLISON: *Quest* was amazing. And some of the women that I met there, in terms of working-class theorists, were just marvelous. It's just like constantly being (claps hands), Wake up, girl! You know? Wake up! Can't you

see what's going on? Wonderful, astonishing, but at the same time, operating out of an institution that was an old Left program. The Institute for Policy Studies was where a lot of the resources and money was coming that funded *Quest*. And in fact, there was some kind of legal settlement that I was never clear about, that was articulated with some stuff that happened with Charlotte and Rita Mae Brown and IPS, where all that money came from. I wound up doing a lot of fundraising, and it near killed me. It's really hard for me to ask people for money.

ANDERSON: How did you learn how to do that?

ALLISON: Because it had to be done. A lot of it was direct mail and designing letters to ask, because we were just constantly — you couldn't keep publishing episodes of the magazine without constant fundraising. It seemed to me that my life as a feminist has been constantly about raising money. If I had done the go-to-college-and-get-in-that-program thing more fully, then the universities would have been paying for it, but I was always in independent institutions. It just about triggered my ulcer again, trying to ask for money.

I can remember going to lunch with — I can't remember her name, but she wrote a bunch of the early articles for *Quest* about class — working-class woman who was working over at the Department of Economic Opportunity. She had been writing fundraising letters, and I was starting to write those direct-mail letters. We went to lunch, and she was helping me with the letters, and at some point at lunch she stopped and she says, "Let's just stop for a second." And this was Washington, D.C., down in the Capitol Federal Complex, sitting on a bench and she's like — and she tried to get me — I didn't understand what she was trying to tell me until later. But what she was trying to tell me is, all those women have a niche. "You're not building your niche, you're not," she says. "You know, you should get a job." And what she was basically telling me is, "They're going to come out of this with something, and you're going to come out of this with nothing. And it is more emotionally expensive for you to be doing this." So she started asking about, "What do you do that you really want to be doing?" But I was still in my foot-soldier-for-the-women's-army mode, and I was not going to listen too closely to her. I thought she wasn't revolutionary enough, but she was right.

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It didn't really hit me strongly until Bev got stabbed. Bev Fisher was the editor at *Quest*, and she was an amazing woman — out of Detroit, working class, articulate, big old girl, a lesbian who would fall in love with women who would never respond to her. So I thought of her as like me, a self-destructive — But no, she was bisexual, and her thing was that she fell in love with black men. And she did, and one night came to the office — they had a big fight and he stabbed her a couple times, in the doorway to the office.

Then a whole series of things happened. One, we were all working but none of us had any health insurance, and so she wound up

in the emergency room with no money, no health insurance, no coverage, poverty right into the machine. (takes deep breath) And to pay for it, had to go and ask the women who were the university professors to kick in money to pay for Bev's medical coverage. Not to provide insurance to all of us, but just to pay the bills. So you had to keep asking for more money.

I had been sick. I had endometriosis, and within a few months of that happening to Bev, I wound up in the hospital, on welfare, with no — because I was on unemployment, had no income, and came out of that — I had surgery and, after surgery, had an embolism, which meant out of the women's hospital, which was low cost and was, well, you know, having to go — be hauled over to George Washington and put in one of the — I forget what it was called — the pressurized tank, because I was dying, I couldn't breathe. I had an embolism. And being in that tank for — it was, like, 28 minutes — saved my life. I lived, but then I owed George Washington University \$12,000. No income, no savings, no insurance.

I'm in the same boat as Bev, only a few months later. And Bev was like, I'm over this. I'm going back to Detroit and getting a job in the union. And I'm like, You know, maybe that's what she was talking about, sitting on the bench down there. It was the whole same issue of class, only a different level, and of having to articulate to myself that a lot of feminists were career making, and I wasn't. And that I had been putting aside what I really loved, which was writing, in order to write fundraising letters and direct-mail campaigns and other people's articles. I didn't even publish much in *Quest*. I think I did one article of all the work I did there in three years.

ANDERSON: Were you at least writing poetry at night? I mean, were you writing after work?

ALLISON: Writing bad poetry, writing bad short stories, but not really —

ANDERSON: Having any readings or —

ALLISON: Doing a few readings, but not really taking it seriously. It's hard even to remember how everything worked in terms of timing, but it seems to me that at different moments it was like, all of a sudden you lift your head, and it's like you're lifting your head up out of the water and you can see. First, you're just swimming, and you've got your head down, and you're making forward motion, but every once in a while you lift your head and you can see.

Around that time when Bev got stabbed and I got endometriosis, and I lifted my head and I looked around like, Okay, I've got to get a little bit more serious about, this is my one and only life. And yes, I want a women's revolution, but this is my one and only life. I might want to look more closely at some of the stuff I'm doing. And then there was another blowup in my collective.

ANDERSON: What happened?

ALLISON: Well, somebody fell in love with the wrong person and emptied the bank account, and then it's like, Wait a minute. Why is there no money in our bank account? You bought her a ten-speed bicycle? That's a candy-ass thing to do, that's our rent. Then my collective kind of fell apart. (laughs) It took us years to sort out all that stuff.

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ANDERSON: Is that the last time you lived collectively like that?

ALLISON: Pretty much. (laughs) So Morgan and I moved to Brooklyn.

ANDERSON: Oh.

ALLISON: Yes.

ANDERSON: Okay. Is there anything else, before we get to Brooklyn, that you want to say about D.C., like going north — what was that like? What was different for you about D.C.?

ALLISON: D.C. isn't north.

ANDERSON: Well, going north.

ALLISON: Yeah, yeah.

ANDERSON: Not into the North but migrating towards New York.

ALLISON: I used to tell people I moved north one woman at a time. It does seem to me that a lot of the — yeah.

ANDERSON: You just (inaudible).

ALLISON: Yes, yes.

ANDERSON: What was different about D.C. in terms of politics?

ALLISON: Well, D.C. had a queer community, a gay men's community, that I actually — There was a point there when the separatism cracked and I'm like, You know, I don't even know how to talk to human beings any more. I only talk to other lesbians. And I joined a queer poetry group that was all gay men and me, and I did it very deliberately. There was a point when I met Alix [Layman], and she said she joined a motorcycle group so she could learn to talk to heterosexual men, and there's nobody more heterosexual than bikers. So I joined a gay men's poetry group, because I was going to ease my way into being — I figured, Okay, gay men poets — that's not like talking to evil-ass trucker heterosexuals. It

will help me. You know, I'm moving back into the world. And then starting to read men again, because I had gone through only reading women for a while there. That separatism can get sneaky.

ANDERSON: And you started to be suspicious of separatism then?

ALLISON: Just uncomfortable, feeling like at a disadvantage. I didn't want to — I just don't like writing romances, you know? I mean, I loved *Patience and Sarah*, it's a great book, but I didn't even want to write that, no.

ANDERSON: Was there something appealing about gay male writing at that time, that was more edgy or more —

ALLISON: There were some fine poets. I kept getting in trouble, in part, being an editor, because I loved beautiful writing, and a lot of the — Let's be very frank. A lot of the early women's movement writing is horrible. It's badly done, it's not even — There was this idealized version of articulating women's stories, and you want the authentic voice. Well, you don't edit the authentic voice. But I was raised in the South, and in the South, people tell stories that go on for days, and a good version you edit down to a reasonable story.

So when stuff would come in to the magazine, and I wanted to edit it down just to make it more readable or cleaner, I was constantly getting in trouble, because there was that fight. And it actually went on for at least two decades and stalked me all the way to San Francisco, when I was working on *Out/Look*, which is a mixed queer magazine.

But that ideology of, Don't mess with the words — I wanted to mess with the words. I wanted the words to be the best they could be. I wanted beautiful language, beautiful and true, and I didn't see the problem. Well, I did see the problem, but I didn't agree with the ideology.

And I wanted to write well, and I didn't write well. This is the tragic thing. You begin badly, and a lot of my early work, you know — I'd write; I'd put it in a box; pick it up three months later, look at it, and, Oh Jesus, this is tedious and badly done. Learning to write better is hard work.

ANDERSON: How do you do that?

ALLISON: You write a lot, and you have to steal time, and so I started taking more and more time. Part of it was, being pushed always to raise money got old. The heyday of direct-mail campaigns — they worked, they were effective, but it's copywriting. It's awful writing, and it in fact encouraged the worst kind of writing, this copywriting fundraising letters.

I wanted to do something different, and I wanted to — even the stories that I tried to write, because I tried to figure out — The first story I think I actually ever wrote was about one of my cousins, who

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had 12 kids, and she lost her kids to the foster care system, and she would lose them in sets of three, which I always thought was kind of horrific and tragic. So I wrote this story about her and her kids. But it was like I was stupid or something. I didn't understand how other people see women in that situation, so I wrote what I thought was a complicated, loving portrait of her. But everybody hates women who have — who get drunk and have sex and take up with men and make babies and wind up on welfare. And, in fact, it was hard to articulate a defense of her, and I was all confused about it too. So I had to keep writing the story over and over to make sense of it. Many, many, many versions later it became semi-reasonable, but it was never going to make — it was never going to be what the women's movement — it wasn't the story the women's movement wanted to play.

There were only two women's movement stories either that clicked: That moment when, Aah, it's all a plot and I can be a feminist! Or, I have saved my life by finding the perfect lover — which is the lesbian story everybody wanted. How love saved me. Love did not save me. I kept falling in love. But like my sisters, I would fall in love with the wrong people.

ANDERSON: So are you allowing yourself to have relationships by this time?

ALLISON: Let's define relationships. (laughs)

ANDERSON: I mean, would you fall in love in a night?

ALLISON: Yeah, I could. I could fall in love in 20 minutes, and out of love 20 minutes later. The thing about living in a lesbian collective is that you're not going to do the lesbian marriage. And I think one of the attractions of the lesbian collective to me was that it was a protection. Years after I had stopped being lovers with Flo and Morgan in that collective, I would still preach the ideology that we were a family, because I did not want to be in a lesbian relationship because I was femme and I always would wind up in these butch-femme relationships where I'm the wife. I didn't want to be nobody's wife. I wanted to have great sex. I wanted to have close relationships. I wanted intimacy, but I wanted a protected intimacy, and it was very difficult to construct. The collective protected me and made some of that possible.

Lots of other women I saw doing the same thing. The ideology of non-monogamy was, on some level, a way to organize your emotional-social life in defense of your own bad tendencies. (laughs) You know the joke about, What's the lesbian's second date? The honeymoon. You know.

ANDERSON: And a U-Haul.

ALLISON: U-Haul, yeah, exactly.

ANDERSON: So your feminist consciousness, at that point, kept you from thinking a butch-femme long-term relationship was something that you wanted.

ALLISON: I didn't want a long-term relationship. I was really clear.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: I had such a horror of marriage, not just from my mother but from my aunts. I did not want to be entrapped, and that's what it looked like to me. And pretty frankly, lesbian relationships looked like another degree of trap to me.

So I was a very militant non-monogamous, and I would deliberately — you know, if I fall in love with somebody and had a hot week with them, I would deliberately immediately date somebody else to prevent that relationship from going too far. And I tended — this is the other thing. I tended to date couples, for years.

ANDERSON: That's another good insurance policy.

ALLISON: That's another good insurance policy. This is not necessarily — it's not even political. This is —

ANDERSON: Self-preservation.

ALLISON: Yeah, and it's psychologically complex. Self-destructive and a way of avoiding a lot of stuff. It did actually organize for an independent life, which is something you need — something I needed — something you also need as a writer.

ANDERSON: All right, so back to Washington, D.C. What did it feel like to you to go from the deeper South to Washington, D.C, in terms of race, class?

ALLISON: It was actually a class shift. It was like moving more firmly into the middle class. D.C. is such a middle-class town. It's all lawyers and concrete, and everybody was either a lawyer or a professor — almost everyone I knew in the women's movement — or a bureaucrat, a professional bureaucrat, which is a tremendous — the ones that don't even have (inaudible) degrees. It's a huge population.

And moving into the more small press bookstore movement. This is the part that gets left out. Because in Tallahassee we established Herstore. We also started Morningstar Media, and printed books, and we did two poetry books. I can't remember her name, the author, but "22 Class A" was the title of her poetry book, and it was very lesbian poetry. It was pretty bad. She was actually not so bad. She was a decent poet, but very Paris, very Natalie Barney, very black cigarettes and lust.

Flo was a printer, and Morgan was an artist, and I was an editor and writer, and we ran Morning Star Media. We did t-shirts, we did

broadsides, that whole print media. That's why we called it Morning Star Media and, you know, sold. We didn't make any money. It was like, get a job to earn enough money to print the stuff to sell it, to never recover your losses.

But then becoming more and more involved with the small press movement, in part because of starting Herstore. And Herstore was a feminist bookstore. Really hard to get credit, really hard to get accounts, really hard to become an established bookstore. And part of how we managed it was in cooperation with the alternative bookstore that already existed in Tallahassee, which was, again, where I met some feminist men. Not very feminist, but they wanted to look feminist. I think they wanted to date — Some of their self-interest meant that they helped us establish Herstore, but that meant working with the alternative press movement, which in the South was — it was actually a great place and a great training ground, because writers are different. Writers are — small press people particularly — are willing to consider things and think. So it wasn't the same as if you're going to do social action in the South, and you're going to deal with newspapers and radio and TV — you're dealing with some enormously self-interested, ruthless, not feminist, antifeminist sons of bitches, but not in the publishing.

Alternative publishing tended to be quasi-queer, socially conscious, lefty, who were really, in some ways, good guys, and starting to publish bad poetry. I wrote bad poems and I published them, and a few bad stories. I'm clear they were pretty bad, but everybody else was writing bad, too, so I didn't look that awful.

And then becoming an activist in the small press movement. Because a lot of it was, we were trying to run the bookstore, and then as soon as you do any bookstore work, you discover distribution. You discover that distribution in the country is run by the Mafia, and then you're trying to find alternative distribution or established systems. When I moved to D.C., there was a whole network of people — like Women Make Movies — but a lot of it was about distribution. It's hard to publish a magazine and get it out if you can't get the distributors to carry it.

That whole period of the 70s was trying to set up alternative distributions systems, which is about looking at economics and social organization from a different level, and discovering that it really is run by the Mafia. It really is completely unscrupulous. That it is all — It's one thing to say that there is this level of injustice, but then to discover that it's all about kickbacks, and that you can't even get credit, and that your magazine can be put out of business because this other guy wants his magazine, and he can prevent you from even getting distribution at all.

It was fascinating and evil, and we tried really, really hard to counter it and to set up some systems that worked, and it did. Some of that, you could make coalition with the independent press movement because they were fighting the same battle. The Mafia might be a little

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bit more uncomfortable with me as a lesbian, but they're uncomfortable with those boy poets. So that was fascinating.

It's hard even to talk about how many things we did. Just to make a list is almost unbelievable. If you read histories of the Russian revolutionaries — have you ever read any of those stories or biographies? People who go to not just one — a meeting every night. Two or three meetings every night, and are working not on just one big project, but a dozen projects, and who have almost no home life because they're always doing some piece of work. That's what we were doing, and the range of things that we were doing is almost impossible even to make a list of. Housing organizing. I got involved in the shelter movement.

ANDERSON: In D.C.?

ALLISON: In D.C., which meant, of course, you have to deal some with the [Roman Catholic] Church people, because they're fighting, they want to — and in fact, we eventually lost with the Church people. The Catholic Church people took over the shelter that we funded and put in place.

ANDERSON: This was not in connection with D.C. Rape Crisis?

ALLISON: No, no, separate. I actually did work with D.C. Rape Crisis too.

ANDERSON: Did you?

ALLISON: Yeah. I wound up working with a lot of rape crisis, because a lot of family violence and incest is subsumed under those services.

ANDERSON: Right.

ALLISON: And I was continuing to try to attend groups and find some way to articulate that, and to try to look at it. Incest is nasty and complicated. And I was still dating girls who occasionally put me in the hospital. I needed the antiviolence movement on a lot of different levels, so a lot of work with that, always peculiar.

And because of the articulation of being a lesbian, I kept being involved in abortion rights movements, because for me the abortion rights was also about your autonomy of the body, and that's a lesbian issue. I'm never going to be — you know, I was not going to get pregnant and need an abortion, but I was fighting for abortion because it seemed to be intimately connected to my own survival as a lesbian woman. And in fact, a lot of the abortion rights people were really profound, powerful feminist heterosexuals who would organize just as fiercely for lesbian rights as abortion rights.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

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ALLISON: And made good coalition. Unbelievable number of projects and things that we were doing.

ANDERSON: Do you remember organizations in D.C. around abortion stuff that you were a part of?

ALLISON: Jesus.

ANDERSON: Or the antiviolence?

ALLISON: House of Ruth, I worked on that. I followed out some of the peer counseling stuff from Tallahassee into peer counseling around — Well, it's hard to talk about, because I had this notion pretty early on that one of the issues of getting people to talk about battery and family violence was the shame, and to find ways to articulate that that weren't about — The prejudice and the contempt was just so enormous. The immediate response always is, Why did she stay? There was just this enormous directed contempt at women in violent relationships, and I kept getting in violent relationships. I kept trying to be in butch-femme relationships that didn't go bad, and they kept going bad. And wanting to find a place where I could safely talk about that and not finding it.

And some of the shelter movement work I did was about trying to find a way to talk about violence that could also talk about sexuality that coded violence but wasn't. Very hard, very hard. So I kept going to community meetings and volunteering, which is how I wound up — It always seemed to me like I was always painting walls and hanging doors.

ANDERSON: Were you able to talk with any of those peers or colleagues, then, about the violence in your current relationships? Were you always hiding that?

ALLISON: Always hiding that. And it was a problem even in the collective, even — Flo and Morgan both knew. We lived in the same household. But they were not at all comfortable, and there was a lot of their — You know, it was like, When are you going to get over this? It was like being an alcoholic and being treated like an alcoholic, and it's like, you know, it goes there really easily. I mean, I'm dating her because of how she presents and how she flirts and how, in fact, how good she is at fucking me right, because you, when we have sex — I love you a lot, but you're too tentative and unsure of yourself. She's aggressive and sure of herself. Even if she's not going to tie me to the bed, she knows what she's doing. You don't. No matter how much I love you and am attracted to you, sex with you doesn't work. That's a hard conversation to have. I can have it now, at 58. I could have it at 40. But this is back when I was in my late twenties and early thirties. It was really hard to have that conversation.

ANDERSON: Well, there's so much stigma around that kind of sex.

ALLISON: Yes, yes. And let's be also clear, it was not as well organized. By the time I moved to New York, I started working at organizing and at putting together discussion groups where, Let's talk about the fact that I could have a really good friendship with you, but we can't fuck because you are not my stuff. My stuff is dark and dangerous, and if I can keep it, control it, negotiate it. You know, not date an alcoholic; date a sober alcoholic. Not date a drug addict; date a sober drug addict. Not date a woman who is going to put me in the hospital. Date someone who is going to tie me to the bed and make me really happy. This is very —

And there was just such a horror, especially since, at the same time, I was working in the anti-rape movement and in the shelter movement, but in the shelter movement was where I would find women who could talk about it, and who could talk about falling in love with somebody who would slap you. And that sometimes a slap feels like a caress, and to actually begin to have those conversations. That's where I began to have those conversations. I couldn't have them in my academic, literary feminist world. Nobody would talk about it, and they didn't have — or if they had the feelings, they were not going to admit they had the feelings, or that they had the experience.

ANDERSON: Those who were in the shelters were all straight, no?

ALLISON: No, no. One of the surprises — they would code straight or appear straight, and then you start talking and you discover that, well, no, the Jo she's running from is a woman. Early on, particularly, people would be trying to pass as heterosexual, leading violent lesbian relationships — and violent lesbian relationships with kids. That was, like, the secret of the shelter movement, but it was still 10 to 20 percent. The majority were heterosexuals, yeah, but a lot of the people who worked there — let's be very clear — were lesbians.

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A lot of the lesbians who worked there were in violent relationships, because we were looking for a way to talk to them to get help. I can't tell you how many times you'd go to a meeting, working on antiviolenence shelter work, and then you all go out for a drink and you start talking about your girlfriend and, you know, How'd you get that cut on your throat? Yeah, walking funny today, aren't you, honey? They were all talking, but you have to drink to be able to talk about some of it. And you have to be able to trust people, so you have to get to know them well enough, and you have to figure out who you can't trust.

Some of the organizations blew up and you could get fired. Some of it was queer baiting, but some of was, you know, You have a psychological problem. You are a dangerous person to be in this position, trying to help women. You can't help women, you have a problem. Yeah.

ANDERSON: So did you end up finding tools or healing in those places? Were you looking for it?

ALLISON: Underground and around about, yeah. (laughs) But more and more in terms of an articulated sexual freedom movement, outside the shelter movement.

The other thing you need to remember — because by that time, it's '76, Jimmy Carter, and then moving on from Jimmy Carter, and all of a sudden there was money coming down from the federal government into these organizations. That's how we lost the — we, I say *we*. Many of us who had worked on getting the shelter established in Washington, D.C., lost control of it to the Catholic Church. They looked more respectable and they did a really good campaign, but also because suddenly there was federal funding. Now, we had been making these things work by raising money on a constant basis. But suddenly there was money available from the government, and they could write a proposal, and they had an institution that looked really good and socially respectable, much more so than our lesbian, fly-by-night camp that put the thing in place in the first place, and they took it over. The same thing happened with a lot of the rape crisis stuff. So a lot of things that we developed, we — feminist activists — created, got taken over by much more conservative, socially acceptable, heterosexual organizations. It was just so relentless. Pretty depressing.

ANDERSON: Yeah, and then it became the service industry and the social change movement.

ALLISON: Exactly. And there was this constant struggle about whether it was radical or whether it was reform.

ANDERSON: Right.

ALLISON: Some of that is coded — I always thought — was a coded argument, because the real argument is — (chuckles) — the real argument was, who was career making and who was trying to change the world? And, you know, both can happen at the same time. A lot of these organizations became conservative because people were career making and they couldn't risk their careers, so they had to keep their respectability quotient. So they couldn't do real radical stuff. It's like, right back to the waitress union. You know, they'll let you do a whole lot of things that look radical, but when you actually begin to deal with genuine economic issues, they'll shut you right down. Or you'll suddenly be in danger in ways you haven't been before, which is some of what happened in the rape crisis and shelter movement in D.C.

At the same time, there was a rape crisis center that survived in D.C., that was radical and that fought tooth and nail for that funding, and actually got a lot of it, and I worked with them for a while too.

But it got to be more and more — because I was visiting friends all over the South. In every city, that fight was going on, and in many cities, the more conservative group would take over what a radical group had put in place and pretty much cut a lot of the services and change the nature of what the original intention had been, so it became far less radical. Now on some basic level, as long as the shelter services are being provided, I still think a good thing has been accomplished.

ANDERSON: Right. It's still a success.

ALLISON: Right. But if you make a shelter in which you can't have any lesbians, and if you make a shelter in which it's dangerous for women to actually genuinely talk about what happened in the home because it's a Catholic nun running the group, who has a psychology degree and is going to tell you, you need to check yourself into a service center — good God, that's a whole different thing than what we had been putting in place before. It got tricky.

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ANDERSON: So were you starting to wonder where your home in the women's movement was at this point?

ALLISON: No.

ANDERSON: What were you feeling about feminism and your place in the movement?

ALLISON: I didn't actually have that break until Barnard.

ANDERSON: Okay.

ALLISON: That's when it really broke. There would be breaks around class and breaks around lesbianism, but they would be small breaks, and I could always think that, really, the true spirit of feminism is not this, and I'd just take a deep breath and let it go. Or, you know, shift and go do something that seemed to be more meaningful and purposeful. And write. Write more and more, write more stories than essays, because story could be more complicated than essay. When writing political theory, you always have to reduce and simplify. But you can make stories deeply complicated. It doesn't make sense, life, you know?

But I kept thinking that there was a heart of feminism, there was a purpose, and that we were, in fact, accomplishing a great many purposes. Losing some battles, or having, like, two steps forward, one step back. It seemed to me I was in it for the long haul.

A lot of the women that I worked with, we kept making compromises and still trying to do radical change, and sometimes you have to make nice.

ANDERSON: Why did you move north to Brooklyn? What prompted that decision?

- ALLISON: Well, when the bank account got emptied. I decided to go back to school. And some of it was, I don't know enough. But also, it was getting harder and harder to make a living and manage.
- So I went to Brooklyn with Morgan, and signed up at the New School. I was going to get my degree in anthropology, and then I thought, Okay, I'll be a professor. I'll just join with all these others and I'll do some career stuff, and I'll begin to take my life seriously, because clearly, the lesbian collective is not going to take care of me in my old age, and I'll get a job. I always had a job, but this time I'm like, I'm going to get a real job instead of the short term.
- And so I went to the New School in anthropology, but I did exactly what I always do. We moved to Brooklyn, I signed up at the New School. I had to get a job, saw an old girlfriend, went to apply for the job at *Poets & Writers*, and, at the same time, started going to readings and magazine meetings. There was something about the matriarchists. I can't remember who those girls were, but I went to some conference they did.
- ANDERSON: In '79 I think you said.
- ALLISON: They were crazy. (laughs) It's like, You people are stupid, you're just crazy. And then being asked to join the collective at *Conditions*, and that was exactly right, because it was more a writers' writers group. *Quest* had been more a political theory magazine.
- ANDERSON: Was it run collectively at *Quest*?
- ALLISON: No. Well, as collective as an editorial board gets, but it was really run by the three people who were the IPS [Institute for Policy Studies] people, who had the money, although they tried to run it as a collective. I don't know if I believe it actually worked that way, but close to. Some people were being paid, most were not.
- ANDERSON: So *Conditions* was set up differently.
- ALLISON: *Conditions* was a collective and, in fact, they had made a decision to expand the collective, and they doubled the editorial board, but they only brought in women of color and working-class women. I was the working-class white girl. All the other women who joined the editorial board that year were women of color. That's where I met Jewelle [Gomez] and Cheryl [Clarke], and a bunch of people I became close to. But by that time, I had been working in — I've left out a lot — the Feminist Federal Credit Union, which was a thing I did in D.C., where I was the only white woman in a largely — it was money, it was a credit union. I was the office manager, but the board was predominantly black D.C. women, which is a really — Wow! Great organizers, ruthless. Wonderful women. So by the time I moved to Brooklyn, I was real

comfortable with being the only white girl in the room — or not real comfortable, but I had learned to manage it. I mean, it's uncomfortable, but it's how it is.

We were writing great stuff and publishing amazing stuff. Much more of an interest in writing stories than poetry, which I loved more than essays and theory. Theory was — you could prove anything, particulate anything. *Conditions* was also — everyone was a social activist on some level, and so we were all involved in other stuff.

45:00

When I hit New York, some other stuff had happened. I had dated someone who really brought me face to face with some of my stuff. It was like, Okay, I've got to stop this. I have got to be more realistic about what is really going on in my sex life.

ANDERSON: You mean in terms of violence?

ALLISON: Yeah, yeah. So when I went to New York, there was an S/M group, which was primarily heterosexual, and I went to some of their meetings and tried to find — But there were feminists in that group, but they were not my kind of feminists.

At the same time, I had started at the New School, so I thought, All right, how shall I actually figure this out? (laughs) So I went in the back of the *[Village] Voice* and found the ads for female dominants, made some phone calls, and went in as an anthropologist to interview female dominants. I'm like, Okay, I am going to get realistic about this. If I am going to continue being sexually attracted to this, I've got to actually get realistic.

And I did it first as an anthropologist, but mostly as a feminist, and in fact wound up doing an ethnography of working-class women who became female dominants, because those were the ones that would talk to me more easily. There were some transgender people back then, but they wouldn't talk to me because I looked too much like a — what I was, and I dated a couple of them, which was complicated and interesting and educational.

Then it was like, Okay — started a group and started a discussion group and, really, I think the first — I wrote the ad. I was dating this one women, two — I was dating a couple, a butch-femme couple.

ANDERSON: Wow.

ALLISON: Yeah. Great sex, complicated emotional life. We decided to start a discussion group, so we put flyers in the bathrooms in the women's bars and we said, A discussion group on politically incorrect sex, which was our coded way. Now, I'm used to the whole concept of using coded words and trying to pull in the people you want, but doing it as — and the concept of using politically incorrect sex, and, really, what we were looking for was S/M, butch-femme — but we pulled in a lot broader than that using that phrase. A lot of the early meetings were fascinating,

because there were all these people talking about sexual fetish and perversity, and I was just like, Whoa, I never even thought of that.

ANDERSON: Let me try.

ALLISON: Yeah. And I had the anthropologist fascination with, You can come that way? Wow. But I was also broke and desperate for cash, so I started working at *Poets & Writers*, but I also started working as a coat-check girl at a leather bar, a heterosexual leather bar down in the Meatpacking District. (laughs)

ANDERSON: A double life.

ALLISON: I got the job by one of the women I interviewed, and she says, “You know, you can make some money; it’s all off the books.” So yeah, double life.

So once again, I actually had, like, three levels of a life. I had my life as a feminist editor at *Conditions* and writing stories. I had my life at the New School, which is an anthropology life. And then I had this other nefarious life, which was intimately connected, and some of the same people overlapped, but many of the people who overlapped were completely closeted in those strata. I remember once throwing a Thanksgiving Day party and inviting everybody from all my three lives. Fortunately, I had a big fucking apartment, because they did not speak to each other. People formed a little huddled group and looked suspiciously at each other, and they would kind of recognize each other. It was made clear to me that I should never do that again.

It created entirely too much dissonance, but it also saved my life, because I had reached the point where I really — (sighs) My sisters and I, we joke about it. It’s not a joke, it’s just — Our joke is, when we go to a party and there’s an evil fucking motherfucker in the corner, a drunk, nasty motherfucker — if it’s a man, my sisters are over there flirting him up, and if it’s a woman, I’m there.

At a certain point, it just became obvious to me that the women I was falling in love with — one of them was going to kill me, and that I had to do something about it, but I couldn’t figure out anything. I was a feminist. I understood incest. I understood the conditioning of violence. I understood self-hatred. I understood a whole bunch of things. It never changed anything. I’m like, All right, what is really going on here? Why? And especially after I started interviewing people about fetish and all of that eroticization. I was like, Okay, what if I organized my sex life the way I organized my political life? Could we really make this a little safer and saner?

And that was the whole premise of the Lesbian Sex Mafia, which is, what if we really just tried to make it a little safer and saner? Some of it was just about getting information. “How Not to Get Killed” was one of our early workshops. (laughs)

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ANDERSON: Did you really call it that?

ALLISON: I did. It got a pretty good response, because it was a joke and people could laugh, but then they could talk about, But she nearly killed me, or, I wound up in the hospital, or, you know. God. And seeing people who have destroyed or deformed their lives completely, unnecessarily. And being forced to be more radical by the nature of the people who showed up.

There was a lot of fighting when we started the Lesbian Sex Mafia. There were people who wanted it just to be a lesbian group, and I'm like, Well, no, actually, I don't think that's going to work, because I don't think that's the essential issue we're going to talk about.

And then there were, oh, the whole — some of the women I met in the kinky community in New York were — I met some Olympic athletes who were pre-op transsexuals. They weren't really. They were incredibly butch dykes who wanted incredibly femme lovers, but they couldn't get what they wanted, and so they were going to have sex-change surgery in order to get what they wanted, and I was what they wanted. Well, actually, a higher-femme version of me was what they wanted. They didn't want to be men. They didn't have — I've met transgender people who really did have gender issues, but these were just people who wanted the kind of loving sexual relationship they wanted. They couldn't get it any other way and were going to become men to get it. From the beginning, when we established the Lesbian Sex Mafia and started having open meetings and these people showed up — you took one look around the room, half of them abandoned their plans for surgery, because what they wanted was in the room and was looking back at them, very happy to find them. (sighs)

But the tragedy of meeting people who had deformed their lives or hated themselves simply because lust, to them, was so endangered and so dangerous. It didn't have to be. You know, a woman whose whole sexual response, who is completely orgasmic if you spank her first, and then if you don't spank her, it doesn't ever happen. Doesn't even want to do anything elaborate or ritualized or even involving any equipment, but, you know? (laughs)

It just seemed to me so unjust, so ridiculous, and a profoundly feminist issue. Because I do not know how desire is conditioned, and I'm willing to discuss the possibility that most of my masochistic desires originated in being beaten as a four-year-old. I can see that, but, you know, I was beaten as a four-year-old, it's there, it's in place, and nothing I have done in life has ever removed it, except made me asexual, and I don't think that's a happy solution. So I'm perfectly willing to have all those discussions, but I am not willing to live a life in which there is no sexual desire and that there is no connection, especially since, if you have a little bit of a sense of humor and a little bit of pragmatism, it's not that complicated. It can be made complicated.

And that was the most dangerous thing we did. But from very small beginnings, just trying to have these discussion groups, enormous things come, and that little group of half a dozen people, in a couple of years, was hundreds of people and an organization, and had had to have huge, complicated fights, because, in fact, I wasn't going to compromise and I started the damn thing. I'm like, You know, I'm not saying no to anybody. All pervers welcome. And I don't care if you used to be a boy and now you're a girl. I don't care about any of that shit. I simply want us to organize for our own survival.

It was very, very powerful feminist action, and it became troublesome because there were a lot of feminist groups that disapproved entirely. There were a lot of moralist feminists, and the antiporn people reacted to us with such horror.

55:00

ANDERSON: And we'll save the whole violence story for the next tape, because we've only got a couple of minutes left. So I don't want to get into Barnard yet.

ALLISON: The funny thing was, all that time I was working at *Conditions*, and the essential difference — I had gotten older, I had made some decisions. I stopped being closeted, so that everyone who worked with me or knew me in the — And I started publishing stories and working as an editor and writing for the *Voice*. I was simply very matter-of-fact about who I was and that I was this kinky pervert. And I used *queer* and *kinky* and *pervert* because I didn't want to go into the details of what it is I do in bed, because mostly that's tedious. It's like talking to your kid about sex. I don't want to talk to you about what I do in bed. I simply want you to know that, yes, exactly, I am that person you are uncomfortable with and I'm a feminist.

Being out was like — it was like coming out as a lesbian. It was just being, Okay, I'm going to stop hiding. It meant, immediately, that when I did get in a relationship with a woman who had turned out to be a drug addict — (laughs) I thought I had done so well, but no, she was sneaking in the bathroom to do heroin — I could say, Woops! And call somebody. And they could come, and when she tried to keep me in the apartment, get help.

But being out and being matter-of-fact and having resources made a huge difference. It had worked for me as a lesbian; it worked for me as a pervert. And most of the women that I knew, feminist women who were not — I would not have called them pervers. Maybe they were a little butch-femme, most lesbians are on some level — really didn't have a big issue with it. I mean, they were curious and they had that whole voyeuristic curiosity and wanted to know more — Ooh, you really do that? Can I see your toy bag? — and all that shit. But understood it as a feminist issue. It meant they could stop wasting a lot of energy and a lot of time, and continuing to be a dogged, obsessive activist and do so many meetings, so many projects.

ANDERSON: So did telling the truth about it, coming out like that about your sexual desire, then allow for more safety for you?

ALLISON: In many ways, yeah. It created some other dangers, yeah. I got blackmailed. (laughs)

ANDERSON: Right. But if you were, then, in a dangerous situation, you had resources.

ALLISON: Oh yes, absolutely. Also, you'd meet someone at a bar, you're attracted, and you can check in. That was one of the things that we did, was that we established, Yes, Margaret dated her. You don't want to date her, this is what she really does. And, you know, That one is crazy, and, you know, just sharing information. A lot of the stuff, it's available online now. We had to create resources, phone trees, and meetings. And a newsletter. We'd always done newsletters. Every goddamn organization has a newsletter.

ANDERSON: I hope there's a copy of that one somewhere.

ALLISON: Somewhere in the barn, a bunch of stuff, yeah.

ANDERSON: All right. We're going to pause there.

58:16

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

ALLISON: And knowing — well, suspecting what I think is coming.

ANDERSON: What do think is coming?

ALLISON: Did you ever read a novel by John Brunner called *Stand on Zanzibar*? It's a lesson in how prescient and insightful writers can be. It's a big, trashy science fiction novel that I read when I was young, and which just knocked the socks off me. There's a lot of science fiction that talks about the triumph of corporate capitalism. Philip K. Dick did a bunch of stuff about it. But Brunner's novel was overwhelming to me because it showed more of what happens to people on their individual level. It's pretty devastating, and it's dead-on what we're going through now. It is — you know, communism is gone, it's the triumph of corporate capitalism, it's the triumph of the super-rich, and it's literally eat-the-poor time, which is where we've been aiming for a long time.

Now we're going to have to have a whole new socialist revolutionary movement, or else we're fucked, because then we'll have a different kind of revolutionary movement, and those kind of revolutionary movements hurt a lot of people. A lot of people die, and then it takes centuries to recover, and we'll have to start over with the women's movement. (laughs)

ANDERSON: Those are not any voices that you hear out there these days.

ALLISON: You hear so goddamn few voices these days.

ANDERSON: Yeah, you do, you do.

ALLISON: I'm also thinking we need to put pretty much the entire major media in jail too. (laughs) Let's put everybody that runs the television networks and most of the newspapers. It's almost unbelievable to me, where we have come.

ANDERSON: You must also feel that, in the reverse, in the positive, that it's almost — I mean, so many people who have been part of not only the women's movement, but the LGBT stuff can say, We didn't even think we'd see this. Like Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, for example, you know, would say, I really didn't think we'd see gay marriage, or whatever else.

ALLISON: I mean, I actually don't believe in marriage for heterosexuals much less homosexuals, but to see how, in fact, the country has changed, against its own interest and desires, yes.

I was thinking last night, when I went to bed, I was thinking, What is feminism and what am I pleased about? Because every once in a while, we better think about that. My measure for almost every goddamn thing is my two sisters, in part because they are exactly the

kinds of people that the women's movement often forgets — or at least the women's movement I've been an activist part of for so many years — because they're uneducated working-class women who love me but think I'm a little strange. You know? And because they were mostly single mothers, and because they have all the bad tendencies of my family, so that none of the immediate corporate successes of feminism are ever impacted on them. You know, they never got into career making. One of them wires guidance systems for missiles, and the other works as a secretary in a collection agency that collects from corporations. That's not the triumph of academic feminism.

ANDERSON: Or even equal rights liberal feminism.

ALLISON: Yeah. This doesn't really touch their lives, but so much does.

ANDERSON: Like what?

ALLISON: Like the changes in the divorce laws. Like the changes in your own financial control of your life. I go to colleges and talk to kids about how, when I got my first job and tried to get a credit card, I was told I had to have — I was 22 years old, maybe 23, and they wanted me to go to my stepfather and get him to sign off before I could get a MasterCard? As if that was ever going to happen. But that's, literally — you know, at 23, I was still property, in a property relationship to my stepfather.

That was part of the money and economic system of this country, and it's really hard to see that stuff change, but that's gone. Women are economic creatures. Now, we're still only, in most cases, two-thirds of a person in economic terms. If you know anything about insurance, which is where all of that most resistant conservative stuff still resides, women are two-thirds of a man. If you look at an insurance policy and what you inherit, look at Social Security. In Social Security terms, women are half a man. You just — there's no equity. We've still not attained equity in that stuff. But meanwhile —

ANDERSON: We have autonomy in a different kind of way.

ALLISON: Well sort of, some autonomy.

ANDERSON: Your sisters can earn a living without —

ALLISON: They can earn a living, divorce, and marriage is still not equitable, but it's not as bad as it was. And all of the changes that have taken place have been a direct product of feminism. But a lot of the changes that have taken place that I track to feminism, the culture doesn't. And they don't even see how different it is.

5:00

ANDERSON: Yeah. And until they see, there will continue to be this misogyny. I mean, I really feel like, without knowing the history and knowing where it comes from, there's still this antifeminist sentiment out there that's really so ignorant.

ALLISON: For good damn reason, because, in fact, there are people who, it's in their interest for this not to be so; or to retrench and back up, because, after all, they take care of their women.

I think, in ways, you can understand this country — If you look at the Bush family, which is so criminally conservative and heartless on such a basic level — I hate to come down to personalities, but I'm a writer, so I do — and it's just, We'll take care of ours, and the rest of you are on your own. Which is the worst tendency that this country has in terms of its economic system. And at least for a good 30 years, we had a social justice system that put in place a support system for people in huge trouble and the poor, as if you could disdain or destroy the poor without destroying your own culture.

I mean, you can look and see what's happening in California now, because the education system here is bankrupt. No money is going into it, which means, in fact, that those productive families with children are leaving the state, which is having an immediate impact on property values and tax base. But the short-sighted, stupid conservatives don't even want to acknowledge that this is going on. They think that they can run this ruthless culture and have no reprobation; that nothing can impact on them. The basic crime statistics comes right out of that. That, to me, is a feminist issue.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: Being on the bottom is always an issue, and it's a feminist issue.

ANDERSON: Right, but the mainstream movement doesn't see it that way.

ALLISON: Which mainstream movement?

ANDERSON: The women's movement.

ALLISON: But there are — this is the thing.

ANDERSON: I don't mean that there aren't feminists out there who do.

ALLISON: Yes, but there are also many feminist movements.

ANDERSON: Yeah, oh yeah.

ALLISON: Which has always fascinated me, and we're all struggling for the title of *feminism*. You wanted to wait until today to talk about Barnard and the sex wars, and we can talk about the sex wars and all that stuff, but I

actually see it as a struggle for who, in fact, defines feminism and what, in fact, is feminism. As far as I can tell, that's been going on from the very beginning, right back to the whole fight about whether lesbianism was a feminist issue. Whether the war in Vietnam was a feminist issue. I can remember reading stuff — in the War Resisters League was the first place where I was reading Grace Paley and Enid Dame and people that I met after I moved to Brooklyn, whose vision of feminism was large and inclusive and seemed to me to be about justice.

But there is a feminism that is small minded. There are actually a lot of feminisms that are small minded: I'm going to take care of my people. And I can fall into that.

ANDERSON: Yeah. It always surprised me about you and Amber and — well, particularly you and Amber, how you fiercely held on to the label.

ALLISON: Fuck yes.

ANDERSON: Despite the attacks and the vilification that came from within your ranks in a certain way.

ALLISON: What are you going to do, throw away more than half your life?

ANDERSON: Some people did. Some people did check out of feminism (inaudible) and say, This is not a home for me, I'm going in a different direction. I was always curious about the ways in which you both held on to the word, the term, the label, and the struggle, albeit differently defined.

ALLISON: In some ways it goes back to Baptist Sunday school. Feminism saved my life, I'm not letting it go, even though at times it's been a really hard room to occupy, but I'm not letting it go.

Also because I deeply believe that, at its base, the philosophy behind a feminist ideology is human and generous and the best of us. There was that quote from Cherríe [Moraga] in *This Bridge Called My Back*, which is, How could this — I would paraphrase it badly, but she was saying, How could this expansive, wonderful, lifesaving movement become so small? And that's a bad paraphrase of what she said, but every time that I would run into those fights, that's what would hit me. You know, take a deep breath. If I can stand in the room with a Baptist minister, I can stand in the room with Dorchen Leidholdt. I can deal with this, and I have to deal with this or I'm going to lose what I spent my life fighting for, because then it does become a deformed feminism. It becomes a small-minded, mean feminism, and there's a lot of that.

You know, we were talking about career making. I'm sympathetic to career making. I'm sympathetic to trying to save your own life and get a decent job and take care of your family and not starve or hate yourself. So on that level, I believe in career making, I believe in finding your niche. But I don't believe in, and I despair at the

10:00

thought of, career making at the cost to other people just like you. That scares me.

You grow up in Baptist Sunday school and you see — My paradigm with Baptist Sunday school is the used car salesmen who are deacons. Who, Monday through Friday, will cheat you and lie to you and abuse you, and then show up on Sunday, toss money in the plate, and be a saint. You grow up in that situation, you look at that, and you see what a criminal enterprise it is to not hold people accountable for what they do on Monday.

That's how I come to feminism. And the hard part is, you have to learn to hold yourself accountable. But some of that also comes out of growing up white in the South, white and working class in the South. To know yourself wrong on the most basic level. I grew up in a racist family. I knew it, especially as a teenage girl reading books all the time, and the books that I would love, written by black authors, and standing in my stepfather's kitchen, listening to him rail on about — oh God, just the casual horror of it.

You know, the worst beating I ever got was when I told my stepfather that Sammy Davis, Jr., was prettier than him. It was a big fight, and how that sentence came out was stupid, but he just about killed me. It was that he was so profoundly racist — that was easy, because I set myself in opposition to everything the man was. But then my uncles would come to visit, and their racism was just as deep, but meaner and more violent, and that was harder to deal with, because I loved my uncles. Then to feel like, you know, I'm going to hell. I come out of this black-hearted family; we're all monsters. You have to find a way not to be a monster, and you have to find a way to love yourself.

I feel that way about feminism, and it pushed me into — I mean, I love self-criticism. I loved that whole holding-responsible, because it gave me hope. I could imagine a world in which we were not monsters, and maybe a system by which we could help ourselves become not quite so big a monster. You come out of a racist society, and you're trying to become antiracist, which is tricky and impossible on some levels, just tricky. You're always wanting to get to the good — I want to get safe. I want to be part of the good guys. I want to be, you know — But you're never — If you're raised white and working class in the South, you will never get there. There will always be new places where you find fear, resentment, jealousy. And it's a good fucking education, to have a deep appreciation of the complexities of political change. (laughter)

ANDERSON: And that's my background, too, so I understand what that means, and it's hard to continually have that humility, like you're saying, of knowing that you can never get it, that it's a lifelong reeducation.

ALLISON: And fear deforms it in such elaborate ways. I was thinking about Cherrie and Barnard and all that stuff that happened. Boy, when that

happened, I wanted so much to grab my people and my friends and have people I could trust. And so there was a way in which — particularly with the women of color that I had been working with in New York. I really wanted them on my side, fighting with me. And their response — not all of them, but some of them — was, This is a white girl's fight. I don't want to be pulled into this.

ANDERSON: Cherrie says that too. She says, "Sex wars? That's a white woman's issue. It has nothing to do with me."

ALLISON: She's wrong about that. (laughs) But at the same time, she's right about how she got played and pulled in, and that was really hard to confront and see that, in fact. I wanted her to back me and fight it on my terms. It was very hard to look at it from her terms and see that she was getting played, and that she was right to hold back and not step into that — or not step into it in the way we were trying to pull her into it.

Meanwhile, the sex wars issues are present and omnipresent in the black women's community the way they are in the white women's community. The sex wars is not just a white issue, although some of the ways we fought it were.

ANDERSON: Yeah. And that historical moment was — that those debates in 1982, '83 —

15:00

ALLISON: The problem is that I was working in groups — Some of the sex war groups that I worked with at the Lesbian Sex Mafia were more integrated than a lot of the white women's groups that I was working in, because it was — A lot of it was about basic survival and economic issues, which is hard for people to understand when you talk about the sex wars, because they think you're talking about autonomy of the body and freedom on that level. And we were, but we were also talking about prostitutes' rights and unionization, and all those economic issues and health issues that got subsumed or just not really talked about as being really intricate to that fight. Because the white woman's issue is all about, I'm ashamed of my sexuality, which is bullshit. Well, no, it's not bullshit. It is an issue, but the big issues, like the horrors —

I mean, the hard part was fighting the antiporn people, when porn is such a criminal industry on so many levels, and trying to give women autonomy in a system that even the best autonomy you can get is still in a criminal system, is really tricky. It would be nice if it were simple, but it's not. It's human lives.

ANDERSON: When you say tried to pull Cherrie and others into the sex wars stuff or the Barnard stuff, what do you mean by that? How did you try to pull her into that?

ALLISON: Oh, just trying to get people to speak out, because we were being attacked on so many levels that you wanted people to help you and defend you.

ANDERSON: And so you asked for her support in a way that was complicated for her?

ALLISON: Oh yeah. Oh, I think it was unjust, because we were desperate at different times, terribly, terribly desperate. I know people who killed themselves out of that situation, who literally — And a lot of it is because all of a sudden they were perverts again in public.

Aside from the fact that some of the tactics that were used in that infighting between different groups within the women's movement were almost unbelievably horrific. I mean, it really was the case that someone called my boss to tell him all the details of why I was a sex pervert and why they should fire me, and that's, like, you just didn't — I did not imagine that that was where it would go. I mean, that they would try to get funding canceled at Barnard, that made sense to me. I'd seen that often enough. But that they would go after individual people in that red-baiting way that I took out of the McCarthy era and anticommunist stuff. But that was it: we were monsters, and anything was justified. Or the woman who set fire —

There was a benefit in lower Manhattan for a Feminists Against Censorship group. And one of the women from Women Against Pornography, with her girlfriend, piled trash up against the door that went up to the loft where the benefit was taking place, and set fire to it. Now, on one level, she was protesting, and she had all this justification in her mind. Nonetheless, she could have burned 400 people to death. And if people hadn't come down and kicked the fire out and called the cops — which is always hard for a feminist to do. But that she felt completely justified and that, in her mind, if those 400 people had burned up, that was good. Those were 400 people who should die. And that that level of hatred and violence was an everyday thing for about a year — it was that level of intensity.

So yes, we were desperate. And, Cherrie, why aren't you speaking out and defending me? And she was like, This is your fight. She was right, yes, but meanwhile, I was hysterical. It was a bad time. None of us behaved as well as we had hoped we would.

ANDERSON: What are your regrets around it? How do you wish you behaved differently?

ALLISON: I wish I hadn't fallen apart quite so badly. That's the hard part to — Because I did. Some other stuff — My mother got cancer. Barnard happened in the spring, and a month later my mother was diagnosed with a reoccurrence of cancer. And at the same time, while I was trying not to lose my job, a woman I was lovers with had a horrific accident and broke her neck.

So it was, like, boom, boom, boom, and by — that was all April. By June, I was a basket case, and I was barely functional, so that there was just stuff I had failed to do. I just didn't have the resources. I could, you know, try to help Jo with her broken neck, which I did very badly, try to support my mother, which I did very badly, and try not to lose my job and collapse completely. I did everything badly for months and months and months, just barely managing to function. I regret that enormously.

20:00

ANDERSON: But you survived.

ALLISON: I came out the other side broken and almost — yeah, broken, broken. I lost a lot of my manufactured face. (laughs) In the long run, it pushed me to realizations and work that I needed to do, that I would have hesitated to do because it was just so painful. It pushed me back into my family, it changed my writing absolutely, and it made me rethink what it was I thought feminism was about and what my life was about.

That also coincided with when I was supposed to be completing my master's in anthropology, and I just walked away from it.

ANDERSON: At the New School.

ALLISON: Yeah. I walked away from a lot of stuff. The things that I held on to I've held on to, in some cases, out of sheer stubbornness, like continuing to call myself a feminist; or continuing to try to work with *Conditions* and trying not to collapse absolutely; and hanging on to everything I possibly could. But I lost a lot.

I lost a lot of friends, for my reasons and theirs, just because I was barely able to — Even people who were trying to be present — and it's hard for people to be present when you're suddenly a public pervert. Remember, they picketed that Barnard sex conference ["The Feminist and the Scholar IX"] with our names on flyers and posters. There were, like, six of us. And all of a sudden, everything I have done for 20 years has been redefined in their terms, and the terms were very clear. I was a shill for the pornographers, I was a pornographer. Everything that I had ever written about sexual deviance and incest was suddenly redefined as a pornographic, monstrous text. When I was really trying to sort stuff out about incest and sex and family, it was just horrific, and I had to start fighting to say, "No, that's not what I'm doing. This is how you see what I'm doing, and, you know, there's this little piece of me that can kind of see how you see what I'm doing, but you're wrong." And then having to fight it on such a level.

Also, a lot of it was in terms — It was like fighting with psychiatrists who were constantly telling you that you were crazy and sick. I mean, on one level, I can fight people who do the Christian thing — You're a monster, you're an evil person because you're a dyke, and all this stuff — because I've been fighting it since childhood. But to be told that you're crazy. And I've always kind of suspected I was crazy.

You know, I'm of that age. And then having to defend against people who should, on some level, speak your language and have your — you know, we should have had a common language, but suddenly we didn't, and suddenly there were these people who literally wanted me to die, and who would have done anything to kill me or to kill my soul. It was bad. There's no other word.

ANDERSON: Were you shocked by that explosion at Barnard?

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: I know you were on the planning committee of it, so —

ALLISON: But barely. I was so busy and doing so much other stuff.

ANDERSON: But in the planning of it, and in the Lesbian Sex Mafia for the two years preceding the conference, did you have inklings that this was coming?

ALLISON: Oh, we knew that they hated us, and we knew that there was this fight, but I thought this was a philosophical political disagreement that we would work through.

ANDERSON: And it was an academic conference. I mean, you thought it would stay pretty sort of contained —

ALLISON: Yes, and there's academic conferences and then there are conferences that are in the real world, and so I didn't pay much — I mean, I paid attention and it was substantial, and I knew that out of it would come books and papers and theory. But books and papers and theory have long-term and slow effects. It's not immediate.

ANDERSON: Right.

ALLISON: Immediate — getting beaten up on the street, losing your job, you know, have your lover leave town, have people call you in the middle of the night with a knife to their throat and drinking poison and all kinds of horrific things. All that — I didn't put those things together, and I should have, because I know — you know, I have a decent education. I know about sex panics, and I know, in fact, the history of sex panics in this country, and that's what it was on some levels.

And then it was a struggle for — what is it she called it? For the soul of feminism. But it was. And I disdained that at first, but it was. It was a struggle for the soul of feminism. From my point of view, the redefinition of feminism that was going on out of the sex wars was a really conservative response to the open inquiry of that committee at Barnard. And I should have noticed how afraid and upset they were, but I didn't go to many of the meetings, bottom line. I trusted the people who were putting it together. But I trusted on a level that, It's an

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academic conference, they'll raise lots of issues, there will be open discussion. These were people who did not want these issues raised; who did not want any legitimate attention given to even discussing the complexities of why people go into prostitution, or how, in fact, you can derive any sense of freedom from pornography. But if you're a lesbian of my age, you know that huge sections of your life are defined as pornographic. You can go back to Elana Dykewomon in the open of *Riverfinger Women*: "My life is a pornographic text." But they did not even want that level of discussion, and they felt as if their feminism was being stolen. So the fight became incredibly vicious on so many levels, so many levels.

The philosophical struggle goes on to this day and probably always will. I've gotten to the point where I think it always will, because there are deeply conservative strands within feminism that make more sense to me now that I'm older. (laughs) When you're young it doesn't make sense. It's not so easy to imagine giving up so much, but the whole concept of a postfeminist sexuality — did you ever hear that?

ANDERSON: Yes. I teach college.

ALLISON: Oh, man.

ANDERSON: I'm baffled, and they look at me like I'm a dinosaur, but yes, I hear it.

ALLISON: That they could imagine that you'd be willing to basically not — to become a machine until the revolution. A revolution that always seems to be being pushed further into the future. I mean, that sounds to me like 50s American, If you try really hard, you can have a vaginal orgasm. Well, fuck you, I've never managed, and I don't believe in it. I don't believe in a postfeminist sexuality, and I'm not willing to create an ideology that destroys so many people.

ANDERSON: Did those debates and then that vilification of you — did that have any impact on your own sense of your sexuality?

ALLISON: It stopped it. I became a stone femme. It's like, Roll over, honey, and I'll fuck you, but you're not touching me. The whole body became a war zone, returned to being a level of war zone that I hadn't known since I was a teenager. Everything stopped, everything stopped.

I think, in some ways, a lot of us did break down. My response, over the course of that summer, was to write the poems that became *The Women Who Hate Me*, which was a way of trying to work through it. Then, over the next six months, when people began to organize, a lot of defensive organizing went on — had to, had to.

ANDERSON: And you got involved with FACT [Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce].

ALLISON: Yeah. But you did the interview with Amber [Hollibaugh], right?

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: So you know some of the stuff that went on.

ANDERSON: Yeah, but tell me your piece of it. First of all, how did you find the energy, then, with this brokenness, this retraumatization, and all of that?

ALLISON: You need to remember that most of us — what I think of as the early feminists — worked at a level that I still find difficult to explain to people. We really were in the habit of working at a level that most human beings don't. Like I said, if you can go read the histories of the Russian Revolution and see what revolutionaries do, that you'd get very little sleep and you run on coffee. I think for eight years in New York, I was basically doing uppers to move, and only slept when I would drink whiskey to pass out, because I was just running at such a level. You're running at such a level and you hit a wall. That's essentially what happened. Everything stops. And then you've got to start moving again.

So there was a way in which — I think of the secondary-level people. People whose names were not printed and for whom, in some ways, it was a philosophical fight, at a little distance. Now they did really well, they did fine. And, in fact, they are the people who I think of, who really put FACT in motion and a lot of the resistance in motion, and who tried to save the conference at Barnard, which was destroyed by that. They have a different version of it, that's happening now, but a lot of what was in place is gone.

And a lot of them were academics, and they were very good at organizing in their defense, but they were not the first line of target, so they had the time and energy. I think, bluntly, for about three or four months, they were the ones who did the real defensive work while the rest of us were, like, trying not to get fired.

ANDERSON: Sort of the Lisa Duggan type. Is that who you're thinking about?

ALLISON: Yeah. And then, of course, there was a wave that hit them, because they got targeted personally also in the second wave. So there's a lot of, you know — And a lot of them, in academic terms, suffered more damage in the long run, because those of us who became targets had to organize for our own defense, and other people organized in our defense. So in some ways we got some support, but it took months. But in the secondary wave, who got hit got hit in that subtle area of career making, where they got some serious long-term damage. So people like Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter, who are friends of mine, or Carol Vance, who did a lot of the committee work, really took a lot of damage in terms of jobs, tenure, getting their publications accepted.

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For a while the impact was — it was day by day, whether people were managing or not; whether they were keeping their jobs; whether they were getting their stuff published; whether, in fact, they were being — I was disinvited from a shitload of things, but even the second wave got disinvited or delegitimized. And watching that happen was — Bluntly, for a while there I was thrilled to see it, just because, at least initially, there were a lot of people who were like, Well, you should expect this, and, Well, this is part of the process. You know, I'm being rolled over by a boulder, and you're telling me that this is part of the process and I'm supposed to be patient?

But five or six months later, when some of the committee work started to have some impact and we started to organize somewhat in our own defense, then stuff started to happen where some energy came back. But at the same time, my trust in a lot of those people, particularly academics, was gone, just because they caved on so many levels and backed off on so many levels. They couldn't persuade me that their horror and fear was justified, because it wasn't, because they were not taking the damage. In fact, a lot of them got a whole bunch of publishing opportunities, because they were the voice of reason and they could write about this, no less. We couldn't say anything because we were targets, but that's very — it was not a — it was a bad time.

When you come through really bad times and out the other side, you can say, Well, I learned this and I learned that and I developed these muscles. But the bad time is a bad time, and some people did not survive it. You want to talk about people who left feminism? I'm talking about people who left New York. I'm talking about people who had been sober for a long time and went back to substances. The people who disappeared out of their own lives, and at least two women I know who killed themselves because they were real perverts and they knew themselves perverts, and this is the part that always falls out of this discussion.

If you're a certain age — just about my age or a little older — and you have cobbled together a sense of yourself in resistance to a society that tells you you're a monster from childhood, you are fragile on levels that are very prone to break again. And some of the people I know who broke during that Barnard scandal were not the immediate targets. They were the people who had cobbled together a sense of self that was dependent on this notion of this community giving them a validation. The validation disappeared, they were monsters again.

The young woman I knew who was a poet — she was those late-night phone calls, and they resumed. And about the end of the summer, she killed herself. And I had another one in the fall. And, you know, you can say, Oh, substance — Oh, she broke up with her girlfriend. Oh, her poems weren't getting published. But on a real basic level, it was that, All right, I am a monster. That was the thing.

I remember I felt it well. And what I found myself doing was that I simply stopped trusting them on any level, so that people who had been my close friends suddenly were friends, but they were not close.

And I had to be really careful and protective, because they just didn't understand. They couldn't understand. It was not in their interest to understand, and it was not in their interest to identify.

I've seen it since, and it comes every few years, people who define themselves as not queer. It's really happy to suddenly be not queer. It's one of the reasons I'm deeply suspicious of the whole marriage shill game, because that — "Let's redefine you in our terms and say you're okay. We've just decided you're not sick, you're not a monster." If you let them give you your legitimacy, there can be a moment in time where they will take it back. And if you have not created your own sense of legitimacy and you're out of your own community, you are vulnerable to their redefinition. That's hegemony. You've got to fight it. That's what we were doing in the Lesbian Sex Mafia that I still think is important and powerful and saved people's lives.

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What is almost unexplainable are the roots in which people define themselves as monsters. Some of the reasons that people think themselves monsters do not seem to me to be — I mean, I've met monsters. I grew up with a monster. I grew up with a man who murdered souls just for his own survival, and he was capable of things that I think are monstrous.

But I would meet people, even in the Lesbian Sex Mafia, women who believe themselves monstrous. The woman I met — the Olympic athlete who was going to have a sex change when I met her — she deeply believed herself a monster because, in fact, on some level, she had always wanted what men had and she had been born in a woman's body. She didn't have the whole reference that she was the wrong gender. She just wanted all of that power and authority that she saw in what she defined as male. So she was remaking herself as male, but on the base of, I'm a monster, and all I can do is cobble together an existence in which I will always be a monster but I will look like a human being. You know? And to say to her, "You're not a monster. This is how you've accepted this definition. It's not true. There is nothing that you want that is monstrous. You want a high-femme girlfriend in heels? And you want to fuck her unconscious? That's not monstrous. It's only monstrous in the way that you have been taught to define it." It was just —

Even as an ideology, even as a theory, even as a philosophy, it's criminal to do that to people and to let it continue. What I believe was that feminism was about the renunciation of that entire system of labeling some of us monstrous in the service of a machine that eats us alive. And it eats all of us alive. That's what the fight was for me. But a lot of people didn't come out the other side, and that disappears out of the narrative a lot. And a lot of people walked away from feminism. (laughs)

ANDERSON: What happened to the Lesbian Sex Mafia?

ALLISON: Oh, it continues. My God, it still continues. It's kind of — They send me notes every once in a while. They seemed to have — Well, they've lost track, but they would. If you're not a constant presence, they would. It's gone into a whole area in which the fights about gender have become more arcane. I don't think they're always useful, but that would be my perspective.

ANDERSON: Did you stop your involvement with them in the early 80s, or did you continue?

ALLISON: No, no. I religiously kept my membership and continued to participate, although I was doing so much other stuff and fighting on so many levels that my participation was minimal. At the point at which Barnard cracked, I was almost minimal anyway, because I was no longer running it, and there were other people who were running it. I was just a member and was being supportive, doing some public speaking on their behalf, but not that much. So, as is always the case, new and younger people came in and more coalitions were made.

The one thing we did — a bunch of us stayed with it — was just to keep it from going in a very retrograde, conservative direction, which was the temptation when you're being attacked on the levels that people were being attacked. Remember, I was a semi-respectable literary feminist, and, in fact, I was working for an organization where my boss was an old lefty. So when he got those phone calls, he was like, Well, this — I know what this is about. And he did not fire me. He got nervous, and things got a little tense for a while, but I was not fired at *Poets & Writers*. And, in fact, I got some support there. That's different from, oh, the woman who was a travel agent, who, you know, got some of the same phone calls.

Remember, I really did get blackmailed a series of times in New York — or, rather, people tried to blackmail me, ex-girlfriends. And you're like, You want me to give you money so you won't tell people what I do in bed? And I'm like, You know, honey, I write about what I do in bed. Tell them. I don't care.

The woman I knew who was a travel agent paid thousands of dollars to one of these girls to keep from being publicly destroyed. And we forget. When you're talking about the infighting in the feminist community, you forget that we live in a larger world in which it's dangerous to be a lesbian. To be a lesbian who wants to dress up like a boy and go to gay men's bars? No. That was, even in the redefinition of queers as not sick, that was still sick, and she could have wound up in a mental hospital. Definitely lost her job, definitely lost her family, and that happened over and over again.

So on some levels, the organizations like the Lesbian Sex Mafia — But there were a bunch of other feminist queer organizations that were fighting for their lives at that time, fighting for the lives of their members. And that strengthened them and created stuff. But the tendency was to pull back and to fight feminists, and to fight them as

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feminist, and to do the whole feminazi thing, you know. And to try to keep saying, “No, no, no, we’re not going to use that language, and we’re not going to talk about it that way, we are all feminists.” Having to say that over and over again.

So that’s one of the reasons that I remained very active as a member of the Sex Mafia, even when it was a pain in the ass, because, let’s be clear, Leather Sex 101 is not something I wanted to keep doing after a few years. I’m willing to talk about sanity and safety and health, but it gets boring.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: There’s some young ones who want to talk about that and who have new issues. Bring them in to talk about it. Not to lose what we had made seems to me has been a fight we’ve been having for the last two decades.

ANDERSON: So what sense do you make of the transgender, gender identity, gender/queer direction that so many groups have gone, like the Lesbian Sex Mafia? Where does that sit with you in terms of your history?

ALLISON: It’s not simple, not simple at all. One of the reasons that we were a problematic lesbian feminist organization in New York was that we had a policy that transgender people, as long as you self-defined as a lesbian, you could be a part of the Lesbian Sex Mafia. We didn’t care if you started out as a — we cared. We were curious. We cared if you had started out as a man. And that was profoundly radical when we started the Lesbian Sex Mafia. And a huge fight. And it was a fight even within our own community. There was a huge fight about transgender issues. So we started off on that position, and that position was powerful. And when the community shifted and began to fight that issue, we already had our feminist take on it. Even after I left the Sex Mafia, that take pretty much held.

But some of the fighting about gender back then actually went back to some of the fighting about [Alfred] Kinsey and the whole definition of what was a feminist issue and what was sexual freedom, and what was conservative and retrograde and destructive. And that fight has been going on since the turn of the century — the last century, the 1900s. Go back to Janice Raymond and her definition. On that, we were all pretty clear, and we thought that there was a legitimate and recognized feminist position.

But it is complicated because, in fact, when you change gender — female to male — you acquire male authority and power and privilege. Now, I always thought that was matter-of-fact, and that was a part of feminist ideology, and we could discuss it. But there have become moments in the last 15, 20 years, in which that discussion has become almost impossible to have. Because at different moments, the analysis of gender transgression has been that, if you shift gender —

female to male, male to female — there is almost this pretense that there's no recognition of what really happens in terms of access to power, authority, and safety in this culture. I agree that, if you shift gender in any sense, that you do enter an endangered position, and there's a lot of real danger in shifting gender. If you're suddenly defining as male when you're in a female body, or defining as female in a male body, yeah, you become a pervert. And all the stuff that I know about danger to perverts absolutely comes into play. But there is still a feminist analysis of acquiring power and legitimacy in this culture that sometimes falls out of the gender discussion, and has fallen out at different moments. But then there is just fashion. And then there is just what's hot now.

ANDERSON: Do you think that's what it is?

ALLISON: No, but I think that's one of the elements that plays into it. On the level of, it suddenly became more sexy and transgressive to be a gender-challenging person, a transgender person, than to be a dyke. I saw that happen in San Francisco. And that has an impact on the young in a way that, what's sexy and hot at the moment is what they're going to move toward. Which meant, in some ways, that all of a sudden, people were not defining as dykes, and not defining as lesbians, and profoundly not defining as butches. When you are a femme watching this happen, there's something really sad.

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ANDERSON: There go our women.

ALLISON: Well, and there go — You know, my analysis of a lot of transgender stuff was based on those women I met in New York, the athletes who wanted to be men, who, when you said, "You can have all this stuff but don't have to become a man," they were suddenly very happy. Or at least less endangered, not happy.

Watching all the ways that it has moved through our community in the last 20 years is fascinating to me. There are fewer people who identify as lesbians in a very profound way. In a way, it's almost as if, by making it safer to be gender transgressive, we have legitimized heterosexuality on some level. It's very problematic, very dangerous, and very complicated to talk about, because, at the same time, you still have to recognize that people who are moving their gender are moving into dangerous territory. And you have to recognize it and give that legitimacy at the same time that you say, "But as you complete your transgression, you're going to move into a power position in this society. You're going to have access and privilege that you need to recognize and acknowledge." I don't find that acknowledgment happening much.

ANDERSON: No, nor the critique of gender that feminists articulated 30 years ago. So much of it seems —

ALLISON: It's funny. It's almost as if we say, Oh yeah, we know all that, but let's talk about — Which means they don't know all that, or they're not really —

ANDERSON: There's a consumption of a masculinity that's very retrograde.

ALLISON: Yeah, yeah. And let's be very clear. I have always been a pragmatic feminist on the level that I'm more interested in how, in fact, people are surviving day to day than I am in theory. Theory is all very well and good, but I want to know how people are staying alive on the street.

What I saw happening — because the constant of my life for the last — oh, dear — at least 35 years, has been the antiviolence movement and the shelter movement, because I needed it so desperately as a child. And I have always worked there because I know things about family violence, rape, and incest that are vital and important, and I can just — And because it's easier. I'm old. I can stand up and talk about it the way a lot of the people who have just come out of it can't yet talk about it. Therefore, it is my responsibility to do so. In that area, this is deeply complicated, deeply complicated. Because a lot of the people that I knew who shifted gender in San Francisco 20 years ago and started taking testosterone, became — or at least had periods in which they were — emotionally volatile and violent in their personal relationships. That pushed a lot of people, a lot of lesbians, into the shelter movement, who had never imagined that they would be being beaten up by their girlfriend. But their girlfriend has been shooting up testosterone for six weeks and is having hot flashes and manic episodes. We had so little information about how that was going to impact.

And then that's the other thing that's really painful and really difficult, which is that there is a critique of butch-femme that is absolutely accurate, and it is a power relationship. And what I want to do in bed is not what I want to do in my daily life. You know, you can push me around in bed and we can be really happy. But you start pushing me around on a day-to-day and making assumptions about what my role is because I'm femme, I'm going to fight you tooth and nail. That's a feminist struggle, always has been.

If we are defending our right to have legitimacy for butch-femme relationships without acknowledging the complications of those relationships, we're creating trouble. We have created a lot of trouble, because a lot of the women that I knew who were in butch-femme relationships that began in gender shifts, a lot of times butch lesbians became some form of not just not men, but a lot of times became faggots, at least in San Francisco. But really prone to painful, complicated, horrific episodes. It got very scary.

It does seem to me that there is also something that happens. That when you do a gender shift, you don't become a man. A woman doesn't become a man. You become a gender outlaw. I think, actually, all of Kate Bornstein's work on that is wise and informed and deeply

complicated. But a lot of times, when people talk about it, the complications drop away, and a lot of times people are defending their own lives. Some of that can get pretty simple and dangerous.

ANDERSON: I think that's happened around butch-femme.

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: That we don't air that kind of stuff because it has been so embattled the last 20-some years.

ALLISON: Because you can be attacked.

ANDERSON: We just defend it, and I think that really –

ALLISON: Except you can do it in fiction. This is the — And you can do it in story. Story can be complicated. Political analysis often gets reduced to the lowest common denominator. Theory can easily slide into lowest common denominator. But we are not simple creatures. We are deeply complicated creatures who can be acting against our own interest at the same time as we're engaged in a struggle for freedom and power. Yeah.

ANDERSON: Were you with Pat when she transitioned from female to male?

ALLISON: No, no. We'd stopped speaking some years before. (laughs)

ANDERSON: So you were not partnered with somebody who was making that transition?

ALLISON: Oh, at one point I was dating someone who made that transition, and it was really problematic because, when she began smelling like he, I was, like, totally uninterested in sex anymore.

ANDERSON: Were you?

ALLISON: It was like, Well, this is real shit, this is deep. Yeah, yeah. But most of the people that I knew who transitioned seemed to me to be moving toward greater autonomy and greater sanity, on the most basic level, and became happier, more — They got better control of their lives and less prone to substances and attempted suicide on many levels.

But at the same time, I knew people for whom it was deeply fraught. I've known people who transitioned and then hit a pit of despair, because it was like, Oh, wait, I might have made a mistake. Which is the other thing. It's almost like you can't talk about that. But I knew people who work in the medical — particularly Midwest — who, it's a huge issue that people who have transitioned, and then it didn't fix them and they're not fixed, and they're desperate. But you can't discuss it because that would be as if you were critiquing

transgender, and you're not allowed to. There are things that, it's almost anathema, and you can't talk about it. You've got to talk about it, or we're in trouble. Basic butch-femme, basic complicated stuff — sometimes your imagined solution is not a solution at all. Or it opens up whole new troubles. And we need to be able to look at that as feminists.

ANDERSON: Well, and especially when you're looking to the medical establishment for the solution.

ALLISON: Well, and that's always — That's the triumph of corporate culture, corporate capitalism. They will give us anything we will pay for, and they will not even — They're actually not on our side. Even though there's a lot of lip service paid to, Oh, we're going to really research this and make sure about what's going on. But, really, it's about what's going to pay. What is an insurance company going to pay? What can the clinic make money on?

ANDERSON: Look no further than birth control for that.

ALLISON: Yeah, exactly.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: Exactly. And it's a feminist issue.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: All right, we're going to stop right there.

ALLISON: Boy.

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END TAPE 3

TAPE 4

ANDERSON: Let me think about what we should do with this hour. We're sort of at the end of Barnard. I guess I have a couple of questions about that before we move on to —

ALLISON: There's a lot of New York that wasn't Barnard, and it was a lot about writing.

ANDERSON: About the rest of the New York. I also want to talk about what happened to you and Morgan when you moved into a relationship.

ALLISON: Oh boy.

ANDERSON: We don't have to spend a lot of time on it.

ALLISON: Have you ever interviewed Morgan?

ANDERSON: No.

ALLISON: She's a hoot, whooooo.

ANDERSON: And what happened — if there's a story there — about what happened with the *Conditions* collective around the sex controversies. Was it divisive? Did it register?

ALLISON: Stellar. Yeah, it registered, and they were stellar, really supportive. It was very interesting. I think that moving to Brooklyn — when did I move to Brooklyn? What was that, '79?

ANDERSON: '79.

ALLISON: Yeah. That was, like, the world split open and everything changed, and I walked out of being an employee in a feminist organization. This is the other thing. I had been, for the three years I was in D.C., I cycled in and out of working for various feminist organizations, mostly in office manager positions. The Feminist Federal Credit Union, *Quest*, and a bunch of other things, where I would work for the organization, earning a very minimal amount of money and no benefits, no insurance, or anything, for six or seven months, long enough to establish unemployment; and then get laid off, and do the same work while collecting unemployment for as long as it would run. I did that for three years. And like I said, after Bev got stabbed and I had endometriosis, it was like, I might start paying attention to my real life and how I'm going to survive.

And then when my collective broke up — I will not identify who it was that emptied the bank account, and we have worked it all out since — but the collective blew up badly, and that was very painful, and

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 antiviolence 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.

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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

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

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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

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much engagement with in working at *Conditions* and the stuff I'd done in New York. Working at the *Voice*, I had met a bunch of them, but they were different in California since they were not competitive in the same way that people were competitive in New York. It was good for me as a writer.

It was a bit unsettling as a feminist. And I started having more of a struggle in terms of issues about writing in the mixed queer community. Bo and I became the fiction editors at *Out/Look*, and found ourselves almost immediately embattled around the issues of legitimacy of voice. I don't know if you know about that.

ANDERSON: Go ahead and say more about that.

ALLISON: It was a fight about — There was a particular story that came in that we both thought was really wonderful, very powerful, and an important story, in the voice of a Hispanic woman. Well, lo and behold, it was written by a white gay man. And the collective was like, Well, we can't do that; that's appropriation of voice. Bo and I both come out of the school, if it's a good story and it has power and purpose and it's queer, we want to publish it. We had to fight the collective about it.

That meant I had to think more systematically and philosophically about what I valued in writing, what was the purpose of writing. There's a whole lot of fights within feminism and within the larger lesbian and gay community about appropriation of voice, about the purpose of voice, about what a story means. Then there are all these identity community fights. And suddenly I was back fighting the identity community fight in that mixed queer community with Bo, who — he was such a queen, with such a sense of humor. We were not nice people to fight because we were really ruthless and effective, and we believed, it did seem, in what we were doing, like all true believers. I'm willing to discuss it, but I think we were right. It's a big, complicated issue, and there are places where I would have come down in a different place on the issue, but not on that story and not in that place. It made me look again at what I was doing.

One of the problems with writing about the kind of family that I come out of and the kind of environment that I come out of is the temptation to become a caricature, both as a working-class woman and out of a huge, violent family. You know, you can watch "Larry the Cable Guy" on TV now and see what the world thinks of my family and who they think we are. The same thing can be said about the lesbian material, especially lesbian sexuality. A lot of it becomes extreme and caricature or reductive, sloganizing — stories in the service of an ideology. I despise stories in the service of an ideology. As a writer and as a reader, I always want it to be more complicated, not less. And that was — I had to rethink a lot of what I believed. That was productive. There was a community in San Francisco that wanted to do that.

This is the other thing. You could be poor in 1987 in San Francisco, and be a writer, and there was this enormous supportive community of writers. There were just enormous numbers of bookstores. Readings every night, all kinds of readings, all kinds of programs. There was a lot of small press distribution. It was an incredibly rich and wonderful time, and for three years, it was glory. For a writer, and a feminist writer, it was wonderful.

Dating wasn't bad either. Interesting to discover California lesbians. They were different.

ANDERSON: Were they?

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: You found the leather community pretty quickly.

ALLISON: Yeah, pretty much.

ANDERSON: Did you date through those networks?

ALLISON: Oh sure. But also, I was living in the Mission and living two blocks from Amelia's, the lesbian bar, and going there and cruising butch girls. And being in my — Well, I should put this — I was religiously non-monogamous. I was doing the no-more-than-one-date, and that meant I dated a lot. That meant I met a lot of people. (laughs) It was a rich and wonderful time, and I managed to avoid any diseases, it's a miracle of Jesus.

ANDERSON: It's a miracle.

ALLISON: God. And got stronger and healthier with time. So yeah. And then started doing parties, which was also rich, and doing — the work of a feminist is always fundraising — raising money for *Out/Look*. And then we started talking about doing a national conference for queer writers, and putting that in place. It got to be a really rich time on many, many levels.

Pretty quickly I was back to being hyperactive, although in a California model, which meant I found an acupuncturist (laughs) and a chiropractor, and tried to be healthy, which I never tried before, never paid any attention to before. There are some good things about being California, especially if you're a southerner. But Californians do not have the concept of Yankees. They don't think of themselves as Yankees. And when I thought of them as Yankees, they took offense.

There are ways in which I became more Southern in California than I had been anywhere else, because I was constantly having to counter the people that I was dealing with who didn't refer to the system, didn't have it in their minds. It was interesting. Then they had this whole concept of westerner, which I didn't relate to at all. It was

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about self-definition, and self-definition for a writer is always a rich thing to do, and very productive.

I met younger-than-me writers, because there was a way in which, moving to California, I jumped back almost a decade in my reference points because of the kind of activism I was doing. The women my age, the lesbian feminists my age in California, were kind of — they were all, like, settled. They had houses, they had jobs. They were, like, doing the suburban movie. I was not doing the suburban movie. I was in the city and I was writing and I was — So I jumped back about a decade. My girlfriend's ten years younger than me. And that was a different community and a rich thing to do.

They're different about the writing community also. I remember going to productions of Kevin Killian. There's some funny stuff that Californians do, that I had never seen on the East Coast, that was a challenge to me, and it challenged my stuff about being a caricature. And that's complicated. I don't know if you read Southern literature much. There's a lot of Southern stories that verge on caricature really fast. I think that there was a way in which I could have gone further into that, but running into people in the San Francisco writing community who completely countered that — I can't even explain all of it.

I can tell you about one thing. I had published some stories, and Kevin Killian did a version of a Dorothy Allison story. Now Kevin is a gay writer who has got a very advanced sense of humor. On some levels it was a mean, witty, nasty thing. But he was right, you know? There was some way in which — There are places where, as a lesbian, we get so serious about our stuff, we take it too far. And it was like, You know, he's right. I'd better back up on some of this shit. Especially if you're dealing with violence, especially if you're dealing with sexual violence — and that's what I was writing about — and incest. These are emotionally — and you can — There's a lot of triggers, easy triggers. He made my work more complicated by making me see things differently. That kept happening to me in San Francisco.

And also, I had to make a living, so I had to keep finding ways to teach and work and make some money. Also cycling on and off unemployment. Somebody should give credit to unemployment as the mainstay of the writing community in the last 40 years.

It got interesting. Everything got complicated. Then I took up with Alix.

ANDERSON: When did you end your rule about not more than one date?

ALLISON: I did the year. Well, actually, I think I came a month short of the year. I moved to California the first of October. Our anniversary is mid-September, so I didn't quite make the full year, but close, close. It got to be kind of a joke, because she was like, Are you free? No, I ain't free, you know my rule. But she was always there. Also, because she's

sober and has been sober so long, she resumed going to meetings because I was going to meetings. So we became friends.

And then some stuff, absurd stuff, happened. (laughs) One of the women I dated was a Canadian woman who didn't get the concept of one date and no second time. And who showed up on my door down from Vancouver with no place else to stay and expected to stay with me, and not going to cooperate with my rules. So I called up Alix and said, "I can't stay in my own apartment. Can I come stay at your place?" Because I knew that I could get Alix to respect my rules. So I went and stayed with Alix for three days and would not sleep with her. (laughs) I still don't think she ever believed that was actually what happened. And left the woman from Vancouver in my apartment, because I wasn't going to mess with her. That was really — Emotionally, that was a very important thing, an important time.

I can make a lot of jokes about a whole year and all the stuff I did with it, but really, it meant that I had to think about myself again and look at some of my femme stuff in a different way. My friendship with Jewelle and Amber — because we talked about some of this stuff. Some of this stuff is hard to articulate, hard to see, hard to admit, and then hard to change.

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ANDERSON: What about the femme stuff were you coming up against that you had to change?

ALLISON: That tendency to subsume myself in relationships. It's a funny thing. I had a rule about not being in relationships, but I would, with fuck — there's no other word to use — with fuck buddies, I could still do that femme thing in which they were more important. The priority was always the other person's emotional life, not my own. And changing that was really complicated.

And there were very few people I could talk to about it, but Jewelle and Amber and some butch girls. Cherrie Moraga. I can remember sitting in Cherrie's truck and talking about some of this stuff, which is really — it's so dangerous and so embattled. And because the whole world isn't as articulate or as informed about what our issues are, it's not a casual conversation you can have. You really have to be able to talk to people who are taking an equal amount of risk. That was an important watershed time.

Some of the stuff we were still, and still are, getting a handle on. How do you change your worst tendencies while hanging on to your best? Do you know? You don't want to lose your sexual impulse completely, or your ability to emotional engagement or trust. But then again, you have to look at some of what you do as a pattern and realize that, you know, this is pretty destructive. I just never wanted to engage with a doctrinaire system that would create rules that would not allow me to have the hope of a genuine relationship, sexual satisfaction, and, occasionally, transcendence.

This is the part that gets left out a lot of this conversation. It's — for some of us — transcendence. Understanding more about the world, yourself, your concept of joy, your spirituality. A lot of that — the doorway is sex. If you put too many bars around that door, you cut off your access to that kind of revelation. There isn't any other way to talk about it without using the language of my childhood, the Baptist church (laughs), but it's true.

There is a way in which we can become — we used to say *politically correct*. We don't use that language so much, and it's an inadequate language, but, really, there's almost a language that they used to use in the 30s that's kind of old-school commie, in which people will trade off huge portions of their life for some sense of purpose, meaning, or security. And there were ways in which our feminist convictions tempted us toward that. Resisting it was deeply complicated because we still wanted to remain feminists and make changes in the world, but not trade our whole lives for it and not become robots.

That postfeminist thing where, "After the revolution, you'll be allowed to have butch-femme relationships. You won't want to, of course, but —" That was absurd, that didn't work. But it is a very complicated internal process that you go through. It has to happen in a situation with other people who you can trust making those kinds of changes or taking those risks. Not easy to do in an embattled place, not possible in an embattled place.

ANDERSON: How was California around the butch-femme stuff? How was that different from New York?

ALLISON: They were not as good at it on some levels, but then again —

ANDERSON: Like they didn't like the leather jacket?

ALLISON: No. There was a granola lesbian presence. You know, the granola lesbians. They all wear Birkenstocks and flannel shirts, and that was pretty much omnipresent.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: At least in New York, if you — in the whole New York community — if you stepped into the women of color community in New York, you stepped into butch-femme. You stepped into high-femme, high-butch, and a lot of emphasis on presentation of self. There was an emphasis on presentation of self in California that was so granola ritualized that it was really tedious. I didn't even know how to engage with it. I mean, I can do that stuff. I'm now living in the country. I've got a flannel shirt — I've got a bunch of them. But I didn't want to be that person all the time.

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ANDERSON: And you probably didn't want to sleep with them either.

ALLISON: Well, no, they just didn't — they didn't have that much of a charge. Maybe once or twice, if they could get them to go to a party. Scandalizing girls is always tempting.

ANDERSON: (laughs) So how did you find Alix? Or how did you find other lovers?

ALLISON: I met Alix at a safe-sex demonstration, because when — I quickly joined in the leather community, joined the Outcasts, that was — by that time, they were so long established and had so much in place that I didn't need to do all the organizing that I had done in New York. So I could engage at a distance and not have to be primarily intermeshed with that. Also, that group had a history of ex-lovers and splits and resentments that I just didn't want to be part of, and so I kept my distance from.

Meanwhile, there's a whole bunch of lesbians I had never met. No, let's be clear — dykes. It was dykes on my reference point. I need me some interesting working-class girls. And, bluntly, I need rough trade. I need girls who are on the edge of being dangerous. Finding them in California was actually a little more complicated because of the omnipresence of granola lesbians. Easier in San Francisco, easier in the bars. There's always butch-femme in the bars. But we were about to enter another transitional — So I had a moment. It's a good damn thing I got that moment before it changed, because it quickly became tedious.

ANDERSON: What do you mean? What was that moment that you're talking about?

ALLISON: Because they were still adventuresome. Very quickly — it seemed really quickly. I suppose if I really looked back in my journal and followed it out, it wasn't as quick as it seemed. But some of the gender stuff that started to happen was deeply complicated and anti-butch, and I need a butch community. As a femme, I need it.

Also, there's a lot of public representation of lesbians that's about butch iconography. One of the interesting things for me is that the leather community is about butch iconography — a lot. There's a lot of high-femme stuff, but — Ooh honey. You know, there's a reason I'm sitting on that motorcycle in all those pictures. Appropriation of the icon. (laughs)

It really quickly — There became this emphasis on — The particular lesbian community that I was interacting with the most shifted to an identification with gay men's community that was a place I didn't want to go. I mean, I had completely comfortable relationships with the gay men's community — particularly after I got kicked out of the gay men's leather community — as writers and as activists, but I did not want to be a gay man. And I did not want to enact a gay man iconography in public.

Some of the appropriation of the leather stuff is really sexually powerful to me and I'll go there, but I didn't ever want to be a faggot. I wanted to have faggot friends and go to parties. And they could be having sex in that corner, and I'll be looking over here at this girl. But very quickly, there were a lot of butch lesbians who wanted to be faggots, and it wasn't my reference. Some of it was about gender shift, and wanting to really be that male icon, and the power. Some of it was more complicated, that I don't always understand. But it meant that a kind of butch-femme relationship I saw developing much more often, I didn't want to be part of, because I didn't want those hard rules. Because, for me, a lot of the charge is in resistance to the hard rules and resistance to some of the identity stuff.

This is very complicated to talk about though. I mean, I like me some butch girls, and I like me some difficult butch girls, but the struggle is the charge. And being the kind of femme I am is the charge. Which means that, most of the time, I'm in rebellion against the expectations of the butch girls I'm engaging with, and that's charged for me. And the ones that I am deeply attracted to are also attracted to the charge.

The ones that actually want to marry you, move you to the country, and get you pregnant, I'm not interested in that at all. I find that not only tedious, I find it offensive. And suddenly there was this whole push towards that. Very tricky. Some of it seemed to me to be girls who wanted to shift gender because they couldn't face menopause. (laughs) Bad, bad, bad. You've got to have courage to go through menopause.

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Lots of other stuff was going on, lots of other stuff. It's not even possible for me to sort some of it out. And some of it scared me. Some of the gender stuff genuinely did frighten me. And some of it, I have to say, over time I got more comfortable with, and changed. It was where I suddenly just found myself in my own conservative places, some of which is, I love butch women. If there are going to be more transgender people and fewer butch people, I'm going to be less and less happy. That's a conservatism. I really do not have the right to tell other women what kind of person they get to be. You know? If you're going to understand the nature of freedom, you understand that that means that other people are free to make their own choices. It might be tragic. (laughs) There might be fewer people that I will find sexually interesting in the world. But it is what it is.

And there are places in which being friends with people who were shifting gender and seeing how it really worked out was really important, because there were people for whom making those transitions — like I said, they were happier, more successful, more independent people, and genuinely interesting to me, even though I might not be wanting to have sex with them.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: Now, they were patient with some of my changes, I have to be patient with some of theirs. How it began to affect the community began to worry me, because there began to be an anti-butcht construction that scared me, and that's complicated and has changed over time. There actually, at this point, is beginning to be a new ideology of valuing and encouraging young butch women that I find really hopeful.

ANDERSON: Do you see that with the women that you're teaching?

ALLISON: Yeah. And I see it happening again in California, in San Francisco, which has been, really, one of the most resistant communities in terms of, you're not even allowed to talk about gender stuff because it's such an embattled, endangered subject. There have been enough people who have taken their — who have been incredibly courageous about saying that they were uncomfortable with some of the places we've taken it, and gotten people to speak again. It's still not acceptable.

We're still — this is almost more embattled than the whole sex wars division, is this gender shift. Because the other thing you need to remember is the academic sector — and there's a publishing and writing sector. In those areas, the predominance of *gender* over *feminism* has been astonishing. The women's studies programs have disappeared, and they have gender studies programs. Women's centers have disappeared, and you have freedom centers, which have long lists of specific identity communities, a lot of which really acts against any discussion of identity, any complicated discussion. In some cases not, but in some cases yes. That's complicated, and that has stolen some of what we put in place in the early women's movement, in the feminist movement, in the lesbian/gay freedom movement. Some of what we put in place has almost been watered down or washed away, shifting to a focus on gender. Now, some of that has been powerful and empowering and profoundly feminist, but not always.

You have to remember, we go places out of fear sometimes, too, and easy solutions. And it was always easier to say *women's* than to say *lesbian*. And it was always easier to say *feminist* than *lesbian*. And then it got to be easier to say *gender* than to say *queer* or *feminist* or be specific. Always remember that. If you can make a category that a distributor can sell in a bookstore and a university can get funding for in a program, it's going to dominate in corporate capitalism. And it has.

But there is always the rebellion of the young and the courageous, and I'm watching it shift again. I'm hopeful that it will shift with the information that we've developed. Because there are a lot of people who have gone through some horrific struggles to really examine gender and what it means to be in gender rebellion. We lose track of the fact that there are still people who want to kill us.

Like I said, I was just in Wyoming, with all the Matthew Shepherd repercussions of that community, remembering that we need a complicated ideology. One of the wonders of — and the wealth of impact of — talking about class and feminism, is talking about all the

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complicated ways that class should be reflected through feminism and actually impacts on it. Then looking at the fact that class and race are places where violence comes from in our interactions with the world. Always remember, it was a working-class boy that murdered Matthew Shepherd. It was a working-class boy that murdered Brandon Teena. And it is mostly going to be working-class kids who will kill us in the truck stops in the central parts of this country once you step off the coast. It's always where you're going to be in trouble around class and race and violence. We talk about feminism as if it happens in a rarified, safe world. It doesn't. It happens on the street, it happens inside your family.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALLISON: I always kept in mind that one of my cousins might kill me by being publicly humiliated. And then again, they might marry me. (laughter)

ANDERSON: You've been talking about this stuff with young people for so many years now. I mean, really, you've been on the circuit with your books and with this material for decades. Where do they register now, this generation, in terms of the legacy of the women's movement or the gay and lesbian movement? Do you find them sort of in a more conservative place than the 18-year-olds ten years ago? Do you find more hope in this current generation? How are they responding to your work differently?

ALLISON: I work hard to manufacture hope. Sometimes it gets a little tricky. They are very conservative, depressingly so. But then again, we're at war and we're in a recession, and there are huge parts of the country that don't recognize that fact — either fact, by the way — but it is true.

I teach a lot. I teach writing, and writing is always a gate to finding out more about people really quickly, especially queer writers. The hardest thing I've had to deal with the last four or five years have been really conservative young queer kids, and conservative in ways that I did not expect or predict.

The thing I believe is that what we have is an involuntary draft of the working class, all based around the fact that a lot of these kids are getting scholarships that put them into ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] or put them into — they feed naturally into the National Guard, which means they feed into Iraq. And a lot of those kids are working-class kids or kids of color. A huge percentage of the queer community is military positive, and we don't pay much attention to that, haven't paid much attention to that, in the history of feminism.

My girlfriend was in the army. She was Soldier of the Year one month, and then a month later, up on charges for being queer, and kicked out of the army. She has a matrix that is not my matrix, that I knew very little about. But once I began to look at it, I could see it, and look at my family and see my cousins — my boy cousins particularly,

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.

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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?

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.

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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.

59:32

END TAPE 5

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Susan Kurka, December 27, 2007 through January 4, 2008

Edited by Sheila Flaherty-Jones, March 9 through March 17, 2008

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