

# UC Santa Cruz

## Out in the Redwoods

### Title

Rahne Alexander: Out in the Redwoods, Documenting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender History at the University of California, Santa Cruz, 1965-2003

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## RAHNE ALEXANDER



**Interviewer, Erin Colliau:** *Rahne Alexander was interviewed on February 11, 2002 and February 25, 2002 in Santa Cruz, California. Erin is a theorist and activist dedicated to transgender, feminist, anti-racist and anti-classist issues, and a personal friend of Rahne Alexander's. Rahne has been a student, activist, and workshop leader at UCSC and in Santa Cruz since the mid- to late-1990s. She is a tranny femme, MTF [Male to Female] activist.*

**Colliau:** Rahne, to get some background information, when were you born, and what year? Please say a little bit about your early life and your family history.



**Alexander:** I was born on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October 1969, in Murray, Utah. I am a trans-identified person. That became pretty apparent to me in some way, shape or form, even though I didn't necessarily have the language for it, at kind of an early age. I was raised by pretty faithful Mormon parents, straight out of Utah. We moved to southern California when I was two or three, and in the ensuing years, three siblings were born. We had not a huge, but a definite sizeable family, especially compared to a lot of the other non-Mormon families that were around us. I was the oldest.

Mostly because I had the idea that I was really different from the rest of the world than anybody had previously surmised, I decided that what I needed to do was walk the straight and narrow path while I was still under my parents' thumb, and as soon as I got to whatever college I was going to go to—that's when I'd really start to be able to do this. I can't put a finger on exactly when I was able to identify the word *transsexual*, and relate that to me. My mother had a lot of medical books lying around the house. She's had a history of medical problems, and so she had a lot of information, a lot of literature around, a lot of general medical information. Key amongst them were the *Merck Manual* and *Taber's Medical Encyclopedia*, which are big standard medical reference books. I think it was in *Taber's* that they had the page on transsexualism. I wore that page out reading it and re-reading it, and trying to figure out whether or not that was what I had going on. That's about the most nutshell version of my early life that I can come up with.

We ended up in Orange County. We didn't have a very stable financial situation at the time, and so we moved quite a lot. We lived in Huntington Beach; we lived in Santa Ana, and Fountain Valley.

**Colliau:** Is there a particular incident from your life which epitomizes for you the process of coming out?

**Alexander:** Epitomizes. Such a big word. I think that more than epitome, I would say, would be "the surprise to me," which has the same meter and rhyme to "epitome" [laughter], which was when I got to college. I only really finished applying to one college, which was University of Southern California (USC). My parents were really bent on me going to Brigham Young University, for some Mormon reason, and/or the University of Utah. I never really finished those applications, mostly because I got into USC and they gave me a pretty good package. I decided I was going to stop with that, and out of really dumb luck ended up going to USC. The whole point, of course, of this was just to get away from the church, and get away from my parents.



I got down there in late August of 1987, and there were some other amusing circumstances which surrounded this, but my roommate-to-be was a friend from my hometown, from my high school. He had, at orientation, met this woman, Heather, who didn't want to have a relationship with him, but he was not to be swayed by the word "no." Ironically, about a week after that first initial week, she and I started hanging out a lot because we had kind of a common enemy, which was really, really good. Nothing builds alliances better than common enemies, as I've grown to learn as an activist. [laughter] She got really curious about whatever my big, giant secrets were because it was pretty clear that there were some things that I was not sharing with the rest of the world. She was kind of a curious and inquisitive kind of person, especially around somebody she... She was definitely attracted to me and she really wanted to figure me out.

For the first couple of months that we knew each other, it was great to have such a great friend. It was such a great thing to have her around in this new environment and everything, but still I had all this fear. I had never spoken to anyone about this whole trans thing. I had never said anything to anybody about it, just thinking that if I were to do so... It seemed like such an insane and incoherent thing for me to even talk about. Like, why on God's green earth would this privileged, very smart, college-bound white boy want to become a girl? It seemed really incoherent. It was just that this was me and I was trying to make sense of it. I was really expecting that the moment that I said anything about this to another person that the world would fall apart; I would be thoroughly rejected; I would be completely cast out and laughed at, and it would be this horribly traumatic event. What I usually did was to write down poems or stories or things like that that would allow me to "channel the fantasy," or whatever, to help deal with this. I wrote about many other things as well. [Examples of] the stuff that I wrote about: the potential that I might have for transition, my desires to be read as female and to engage in the world as a female person—all those things from the time I was in high school, I would destroy. I'd burn them; I would shred them and bury them. This was stuff that I couldn't have. I couldn't have this physical evidence around at all. It would have been far too incriminating.

To backtrack just a little bit, when I was in my early teens, my father caught me cross-dressing. He didn't speak to me for three days after that, which was really intense because at the time my mother was in the hospital, and so he was the only parent that I had around. Basically I've got this parent who is not speaking to me, and didn't know



how to deal with me. That was pretty much what I felt was the kind of reaction I was going to get from people if they were to find out anything about my gender non-normativeness. Like they couldn't see it already, but that's another thing altogether, I think.

So, I had all this fear and anxiety around it, and of course my behaviors would continue through college. I would write things down and I would destroy them. There was one day, about two months after Heather and I had met. I was taking a nap from studying; we were studying in her room, and I fell asleep for awhile. I woke up. I saw her across the room and she was just grinning from ear to ear. She just had this really infectious smile anyway. I woke up and immediately I knew what had happened, because earlier that day, in class, I had been not paying attention to whatever the professor was saying. I was busy scrawling out all this stuff that was on my mind about the potential for me to transition and all this other stuff. Because by this point I had started to do research. I had gone to the libraries and looked at the medical manuals and these kinds of things, and started to get more of a sense of what transexuality was being defined as at the time. I had a lot better sense of that, and so I'd started to write about this kind of thing. Anyway, she found out in my notebooks. Basically, her reaction was, "That's really cool. You want to try on my clothes?"

**Colliau:** [laughter]

**Alexander:** It was such a major shock to me, a major shock. Here's this person who has been really attracted to me. I have never dealt well with that anyway, when people have been really into me for whatever reason. Usually, I think if anybody's into me they're insane; there's a problem with them. I'm like, "Why are you into me? You must be fucked up somehow." Me and my therapist are working on that one. But that was my initial reaction, "Well, what's the matter with you that you're attracted to me?" Here was this almost non-event around what was probably my biggest, most deeply held secret. It was something that I thought the rest of the world would consider incoherent. Here it was, and it was being greeted with not just a smile but wide acceptance from this really fabulous woman. It was definitely the most illustrative moment to me, that, not only that this wasn't that big of a deal, but that other people would be able to accept things. Especially if I was to meet them honestly about what I was thinking, what I was feeling. For the most part, I haven't received negative reactions from friends and acquaintances, even [those] who have known me prior to that transition. There were many people who ended up saying, "Oh, well, it just makes sense, of course. It's not a surprise to me." This



kind of thing would come out very frequently. It was so incredibly positive and encouraging. Most of the other reactions that I've received have definitely not been that encouraging, but most of the other people haven't had to do that work for me. Heather did a lot of that work for me, and with me, to help me get over a lot of those initial gender fears.

**Colliau:** How has being raised Mormon affected your coming out process?

**Alexander:** Oh, in really intense ways. Mormonism is one of the most highly gender-segregated Christian, or neo-Christian religions. I've studied a lot of different Christianities, and they've all got their problems, especially around gender divisions, but Mormonism particularly seems really excessive. There's stuff that is embedded in the religion which talks about predestination and choices that the individual makes prior to existing in an immortal body. Pushed to its logical conclusion, you'd be able to say well, so that means you've got a gendered spirit that's selecting a gendered body? Or do you have a non-gendered spirit who's selecting a gendered body, and you're having to make a conscious choice about how you do this? It brings up a lot of questions that many Mormons are not very comfortable in really considering. I'm sure that most Mormon believers would say, "Oh, well you've got a gendered spirit that's selecting a gendered body, and that's the way that that goes." And of course, everything is always male/male, female/female. There's not going to be room for moving around in between those things.

Within Mormonism it's really common to come across people talking about things like, "Playing around with sexuality is a sin second only to murder, in terms of intensity, in terms of heinousness." This encapsulates everything: premarital sex, homosexuality is definitely intensely not approved of, masturbation. Anything that would interfere with normal, God-fearing procreative sex is not going to be accepted. It's kind of a problem. Homosexuality is definitely addressed in the religion. But transexuality is so—you know, I've used the word *incoherent* a couple times in this interview, but this is a word that really solidifies a lot of how my upbringing as a Mormon relates to this notion of transexuality. It's incoherent; it doesn't make sense within a standard Mormon framework. It just doesn't make sense because of all these other factors: predestination; the way the families are created and structured; and the roles that a person has to play as a gendered being within the church. Males are given the priesthood within the church, which is basically the ability to carry out the mission of God on earth, and that's to do



the sacraments for the church, perform all the ordinances, give blessings to people to attempt to heal them. This is a definitively male sphere.

Then you've got a definitively female sphere, which is child rearing, and everything like that. So you'll get a lot of dialogues within the Mormon church when they start verging on talk about equality of the sexes, you get: "Women have this ability to bear children, this is their gift; whereas men have the ability to act in the name of God, and that's their gift." You get your Mormon feminism, more or less, that basically says these things are completely equitable. I can't dismiss that argument. If you're really embedded in that framework and you really believe that those things are equitable, that's great, you know, because from where I'm sitting I can see a lot more benefit out of childbearing and rearing than walking around and acting, "in the name of God." Maybe that just is further evidence of my burning internal womanhood. It just makes more sense to me to engage in those kinds of roles. [laughter]

It's really crucial in the Mormon church that the gender structure be maintained. It's a pretty delicate system, and that means it's easily injured. The effects of breaking out of it are incredibly real. There're passages within Mormon scripture which talk directly to parents and more or less say: if your children fuck up, you're going to hell. Hell is a relative concept within Mormon religion. They've got all these degrees of heaven and hell, this whole hierarchy of different things that go with that afterlife business. Ultimately, you can still go to heaven, but never be in the presence of God within a Mormon structure, which might as well be hell as far as a lot of folks are concerned. And so, effectively, within the Mormon religion that I was raised under, if you do not marry a life partner, have a bunch of happy kids and really function as a family unit, you're not going to be able to live in the presence of God after all this is over. You may get to live next door, or two doors down [laughter] but anybody who's engaged in suburbia knows that it's always better to live in the right house rather than the one that's right next door. It's a lot of that kind of mind-set.

I see that manifesting in my relationship with my parents. My mother, in particular, even though I've been out to her for many years now, more or less refuses to deal with my transition on a concrete level. One of the reasons it ended up taking me so long, because it did take me a long time to come out to her, is that in my coming out letter, I had to explain a lot of things. I had to explain what transgender stuff was, or transexual stuff was, what that meant for me, what it meant to me as an activist and why I can't go to their church any longer. So, it was a letter that had to tell her, "I'm *really* not the boy that



you thought I was, that you want me to be. And I'm not a Mormon. I'm just not a Mormon. And that's directly linked to my trans identity."

It boggles my mind that there are queer Mormons. I don't want to come across as completely dismissing that identity, because I understand needing and desiring a metaphysical and ethical framework under which you can operate. My whole life I was led to believe that these are completely mutually opposite groups. Mormons who are gay and continue to identify as both gay and Mormon fascinate me. In many ways I've got a great deal of respect for people who are willing to battle that system in order to maintain their presence as a queer individual within a structure that really works overtime to negate all those identities. It's not a battle I'm interested in fighting. I'd just as soon move on from thinking about that church, as much as I possibly can.

But that said, I don't think that's going to be possible. To illustrate some of this a little more clearly, this is such a highly gendered church that when you are male, you're in the church and you reach the age of twelve, you can begin to receive the priesthood that I referred to a little earlier. You get to have all these abilities conferred upon you by the other men in the church, and it's channeled by God through them to you. Then you start being responsible for doing things like the sacrament; you go to the Sunday service and partake in the body of Christ, the blood of Christ, the bread and the water. The younger priesthood folks, the twelve- to eighteen-year-old boys who hold those priesthoods, are expected, and more or less required, to make the sacrament happen for everybody in the church.

When I was much younger, I was able to sit and think about all the inconsistencies about the Mormon religion. I'd think okay, well, this doesn't make any sense to me and nobody can explain it to me. The world seems to be older than 4,000 years old, but according to this biblical narrative they think that it's only 4,000 years old. I'd think a lot about these inconsistencies. Then the day came when I was twelve and I realized I can't tell them, no. I can't say, "Oh, thanks, I'd rather not have this priesthood thing. I know you mean well and everything, but I'm a girl." That is a dialogue that would have ended with me being in an institution, worst case scenario. I really wasn't willing to do that, so I went with the flow and tried to deal with what the after-effects were.

But suddenly I began to realize, okay, if this is true, that I am a girl, and this Mormon God exists, and this Mormon faith is true the way that it is but I am still a girl, I have no business doing this stuff. I have no business handing out the sacrament to the people in





this church because women are not supposed to hold the priesthood. I thought, well, here's a moment where apparently I'm female-identified or whatever, and I apparently hold this priesthood, or I'm able to use it for whatever reasons. But I'm *tainting* people's religion. This is going to send me to *a lot* of hell. This is going to send me to ultra-hell, some kind of intense kind of a place that, maybe real bad people go to. I went through a lot of pain around that one, thinking, I can't do anything about this. I'm trapped and I'm going straight to fucking hell is what's going to happen. Thankfully I kind of got over that. I was able just to go all right, well whatever. I'm keeping up appearances because I don't believe in this church any longer. That was, forgive the statement, but the saving grace of the entire situation.

I don't have to worry about that any longer, because it's no longer an issue. I don't believe in this structure. This is a completely flawed structure because it doesn't explain a lot of the things that are on my mind constantly. But that said, there're still a lot of things about that upbringing, like with any religious upbringing, that don't really leave [you as an adult]. It manifests itself in the fact that, even though I've gone about my life, and been an activist and met all these other people, even friends who are not necessarily activists who have known me, who have known the "real me" through school or whatever, they're not surprised by this [transition]. I've got more friends from high school that I maintain more constant contact with than I do from college. Both are groups of people that I knew prior to transition, but people from college knew me as I was becoming more of an LGBT activist, so I was a little more visible as somebody who's gender queer or gender different, or whatever. Whereas the people from high school just knew me as "wrong name" who was this weird boy who wore a lot of hair product. [laughter] It amazes me that I still got a lot of these contacts and that they haven't had problems with this. I haven't even had to give them a whole lot of talking to. I haven't had to give them workshops, or whatever. In a couple of instances my high school friends have really surprised me with the amount of insight that they've been able to develop on their own and the thought and consideration they've given me.

That just hasn't really come from most of my family, with the exception of my sister who is five or six years younger than me. She's really the only person in my entire immediate family that I am close to. We also look a lot alike, so maybe that has something to do with it. I'm not sure. That's my sister, Jennifer. She's the first person in my family I came out to, I think the third or fourth person I came out to in the entire world. She's always been incredibly supportive of me, in a way that my mother never has been. None of my other



siblings have been. I think a lot of what goes into that is typical Judeo-Christian repression—you know it's just not nice to talk about these things at the dinner table, or the living room, or on the phone or anything like that, so we just don't talk about them because it's just too upsetting and too intense.

**Colliau:** Did you give [your sister] a coming out letter as well?

**Alexander:** More background on this. I finished my undergraduate work in 1991. I kind of floundered for a little while after that. I started doing the whole *Reality Bites*, Generation X thing. Working and not working, and not working, and not working. Heather and I were together through this entire time. Heather and I ended up being together for six years, right up until the last six months that I officially began my transition.

In October of 1992, about a year and a half or so after I finished my undergraduate work, is when I made my definitive—okay, I am forever now Rahne Alexander. There was a lot of work that had to be done in that time. It wasn't just floundering. I had to find my name for one thing. I had to select my name, and that took a lot of work. That took many months, to really come down to selecting my name. I changed every aspect of my name. I changed my first name; I changed my last name; I changed my middle name. I wanted everything to be just right. So October 1992 is when I did my official transition.

My sister Jennifer, the one I came out to, graduated high school in June 1993. Heather and I had made plans to go see Jennifer's graduation. Heather and I were also in the midst of breaking up at the time, which made the entire thing much more interesting and fun. So we go up to my sister's graduation in June 1993. We get there after the graduation had started and we didn't meet up with my parents. It was in this big football stadium. I went down on the field afterwards, where the graduates were and met up with my sister. My parents started coming down out of the bleachers and my youngest sister was with them. I don't know which of my parents... I always characterize my father as saying this, for some reason, probably because my mother never speaks in public. She never muses aloud; my father does, so this is why I think this is him. So he says, "Who's that girl talking to Jennifer?" Then they got closer and recognized me. Now, they had watched me grow my hair really long, get my ears pierced and all this other stuff. They had had some time to get used to a lot of the stuff that was going on with me. But they had never mistaken me for a girl. So apparently this



moment was heavily traumatic for them. The rest of the time that I was there we spent a lot of time deliberately not talking about this.

That night my youngest sister told me what had happened with them seeing me. Because they started acting really weird around me. I was wearing women's clothes. They were androgynous women's clothes, but God, I was wearing pleated slacks for crying out loud. Jesus. [laughter] They wanted to ask so much, but they didn't. They just wouldn't. Being the properly trained angry feminist, I was not about to offer information. If they wanted to know something, they sure as hell could ask me. But I wasn't going to go out of my way to offer them information, because it wasn't my job to educate them, right? It's their job to educate themselves. So they didn't bring it up, the whole time, two or three days, however long we were there. They didn't bring it up at all. That ended up making me more upset. They were just doing those sidelong glances and these kinds of things that they had already been doing throughout the visit. Well, this was a really intense event. Combined with the fact that a few weeks later, Heather and I broke up for good.

I was really floundering and ended up borrowing \$200, packing two suitcases and moving. Moved first up to the East Bay. And then ended up in Santa Cruz kind of by accident. I found myself without really any place to go for a little while. So most of the rest of that year, 1993, was really spent not communicating with anybody. I couldn't go home; I *couldn't* go home to the Central Valley of California. By this point my parents had moved out of southern California, out of Orange County, and up to the Central Valley. That's where I finished most of my schooling. I spent about ten years in the Central Valley. So, they're there. For me to go back and be embroiled in agrarian Mormonism... No, no, no. That would have been an easy path to suicide, especially immediately after transition. I had legally changed my name by this point. I couldn't even think about how to bring that up.

Early in my life, when I had realized that writers had pseudonyms, I was really into this idea. As a child I was very precocious about some of this stuff. I started blathering on about my pseudonym and I was actually punished at one point, scolded for the idea that I would throw off my family name, my given name, in favor of a pseudonym just to get something published. That was an event that was very clear to me. It was like, wow, there's a lot of investment in the name that my parents gave me. It's too fucking funny for it not be in this interview. By the time that transition became apparent to me as a necessity for my life, it was really necessary that the name go, because, regardless of the



whole trans thing, if I even wanted to be a writer like I fantasized myself to be, I couldn't go with the name that I had, because the name effectively was already taken. The name was Michael Jordan.

**Colliau:** [laughter]

**Alexander:** [laughter] It was not going to fucking work. It wasn't going to work. I'm like, trans identity aside, "Mom and dad, thanks for the nice name, but it's leaving." You know what I mean?

**Colliau:** So how did you choose your name?

**Alexander:** It was a pretty extensive process. I chose my names separately, my first, middle and last names. My first name took the longest amount of time. I tried on a lot of different names. I think a lot of trans people try to do that. And some of them were frankly embarrassing and some of them just didn't fit me. It was a process of elimination. My final method was to make a chart that ran the alphabet down one side of the page, had five columns and then I'd just fill in across five "A" names, five "B" names. Then I'd go through and I'd eliminate. I'd get down to a top-ten list. A few months later I did the exact same process completely over again, compared the two top-ten lists, got rid of the ones that weren't in common and then really started to think about what was really there, and how they would work and how they would fit me. So that's how I ended up with Rahne. My last name, which has a great deal of meaning to me, is taken from Alexander Woolcott, who was part of the Algonquin Roundtable. I'm a little bit obsessive about Dorothy Parker. I like to think of her as my wolf mother. Another Santa Cruz moment. Alexander Woolcott is more or less my wolf father. Just these random, wild entities that really don't have anything to do with me, but that I've taken on as spiritual parents. Both of them are sneering down at me over their martini glasses about that as I speak these things.

In selecting my last name I thought, I want to have a name that's connected to something that is something I consider as family. I was like well, I can't become "Parker" because that's just silly, and there are all these other names of people who are connected with the Algonquin Roundtable. It just didn't work and didn't work and didn't work. Finally I was reading a biography about Alexander Woolcott in which the author, and I believe this was published in the mid-1960s, so not in a terribly enlightened time to be writing a biography, especially a literary biography of somebody who is as odd as Alexander



Woolcott. This is a man who, at one point in his life cut back to forty cups of coffee a day, in addition to being an alcoholic. This is a very large man. He was a theater critic, lived in New York City, hung out with all these other very, very scenester kinds of people, you know, Broadway critics, Broadway actors. This is prior to the incredible explosion of Hollywood. It's when Broadway was still *it*, in terms of cultural production. Even though he's in the midst of all this, he is very fey, never has a partner. There're a lot of jokes that are always made at his expense about his lack of masculinity. But even though he's embroiled in all of this culture, that hasn't really changed in a lot of ways in terms of access to alternative sexuality. Which is to say that if he was a big fag, he could have gotten laid. But he wasn't really known for being that kind of a person. In fact in this biography it talks about how he, during his college years, was very active in drama and would frequently write plays and star in them as the female lead. It was in that reading that suddenly I was kind of shaken and thought okay well, I don't want to read too much into this. But the fact is that it very well could have been that what Alexander Woolcott was experiencing was something a lot more akin to a gender dysphoria, as we would diagnose it today, as opposed to just normal homosexual proclivity. I thought, if I take this name, it will give me this connection to this world that I feel so much affinity with. And if indeed he did bear some trans identity that he was never able to access, I can give a little bit back to him in that way. I have a great deal of joy about my last name.

I should finish the coming out story. So, I see my parents at my sister's graduation, end up in Santa Cruz and start spinning my wheels trying to get my shit together, [and] situated again. I'm going through transition; at that point I haven't started hormones. I'm just trying to make it in life as an ostensibly female person now, with pretty good success, ultimately. But a lot of anxieties and fears come up with this. What this led to is me not talking to my parents very much because I realized that I wasn't going to get very much support from them. I ended up not seeing them for over five years after that. That event where they mistook me for a girl is the last time that they saw me for over five years.

Somewhere in the middle of that is when I finally was able to write my coming out letter to my mother. I asked her to pass the letter on to my father, but I had written it specifically to her, because mostly I just figured my father was going to absolutely reject me, just out of hand. "Not my firstborn son." My father's the oldest of all of his siblings. I was the oldest child out of that whole line. There was a lot of weight being put on me, and especially as it became evident that not only was I really smart and going to go to



college, but that I was also successful along the lines of keeping my morals right in church, or at least appearing to. I never got caught being drunk and this kind of thing. It was definitely something I didn't expect him to be at all supportive of. More or less I had decided when I sent the letter off to my mother that I would be able to accept never speaking to them again, which is a lot to prepare for. As much anxiety that I had around my parents, I was ready to say, okay, well, that's a part of my life that's entirely over and I'll move on.

My mother's response was a little more supportive than I had expected it to be, "I don't understand this, but you're still my child." But that said, she has had a hard time really coming to terms with it, even since then.

In a nutshell, that's how the whole coming out thing came about with them. I think that what I take away from that, more than anything, is that they spend time seeing what they want to see, my mother in particular. But I think my father does this as well. They spend a lot of time seeing what they want to see, and completely ignoring other evidence that's right in front of them. I often wonder how I even passed as a boy, ever. Even as I look back at photos, and I'm like—what made you think that I was going to be male? It just makes me feel like they had to have known that I was going to grow up to be gay or something like that. Most of what they're dealing with is just denial about that, in the aftermath of me coming out to them.

**Colliau:** You touched on how you learned more about being trans in terms of your mom's medical books. Even beyond that, where did you find resources to learn about it, in the time that you've been in Santa Cruz, in terms of books and groups and academia?

**Alexander:** This is where it begins to solidify. I should say that [during] my undergraduate work at the University of Redlands in southern California I spent a great deal of time doing a lot of activism on lesbian and gay issues around abortion, anti-Gulf War, these kind of things. Pretty typical leftist, liberal, urgent college agenda kind of stuff. But it was explicitly lesbian and gay stuff that we were dealing with. In all of the work that was being done, here I was with Heather, in a relationship with Heather. Both of us were on the front of all this lesbian and gay activism that was going on. But we were apparently like this heterosexual queer couple. Here I was this big effeminate, probably-gay boy and there was this little loud-mouthed dyke and we were apparently straight. I'm sure that the more educated queer people would look at us and go like, "What are you doing? What's going on here?" Because I wasn't out as trans at that point



at all. I ended up feeling very much on the outskirts of a lot of that activism, in the end. Because I wasn't completely 100 percent there. I wasn't able to identify myself as trans to a lot of my fellow activists. That didn't really start manifesting itself until I got to Santa Cruz.

It was 1995 when I started doing editing and paid stuff for the newspaper that was being published by the Santa Cruz Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Community Center. At the time it was called *News and Views of Santa Cruz*. It was an awful paper. I was embarrassed for the community to have this paper. I know that the people who put it together had long nights, especially after I learned how they did it. I was shocked, what they had to do to make this paper happen. This is also around the time I had been working with a feminist publishing house in Watsonville. I had some friends who were Kresge students, who were interning there. I got a lot more directly hooked in with the University populations at that point, started attending events and getting a little bit more of a refresher on the collegiate activism that had more, not so explicitly at this time, but more of an accepting basis for especially for bisexual and trans identified people. Just teensy more visibility than we had in 1991. So I start doing this newspaper, and by the end of the year, I'm basically running the paper. This carries over to 1996 and I ended up being on the board of directors of the SCLGBTCC [Santa Cruz Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Community Center] currently known as the Diversity Center.

This is where I began to have a lot more dialogues. I got to meet people like Scott Morgensen, who was a staffer at the SCLGBTCC at the time. This is the beginning of what I can think of as the trans aspect of my queer activist career, where I'm having to be a lot more vocal about trans issues and bring a trans voice.

Queer and feminist communities have had specific resistances and acceptances, and ebbs and flows of dealing with me as a trans person. I haven't really spoken about the trans community itself. In part, it's kind of enveloped in the larger queer community, but I think only in part. There're definitely trans people who are resistant to being lumped in with LGB folks because they [feel], "I'm not gay. I'm not lesbian. I'm none of those things: I'm heterosexual." They're very strict about that kind of thing, which I find to be reactionary. I approach being trans as a feminist.

As I was coming out as trans to myself and Heather, I was taking a wonderful Study of Women and Men in Society program at USC in southern California that was team-taught by Barrie Thorne and Michael Messner. So enlightening! It made a feminist out of me; it



made a feminist out of Heather. It did *really* good work. It helped me understand the kind of woman that I wanted to become, more or less. Otherwise I might as well have ended up today wearing blue taffeta, and, Jesus, white pumps or something like that. Who knows what could have happened? You'd get all this rustling on the [laughter] microphone right now. I do declare. [Southern accent]

I'm a big fan of going out and demanding space within LGBT environments, within feminist environments, but like with any other privileged class, it's very easy to make demands and expect that they be met, especially when frequently you're dealing with people who are vocal, who are white, and who have spent a significant amount of time living and functioning as a male. That's going to be met with resistance. It's going to be met with a lot of resistance by people of color, by lesbians, by feminists. It's not going to work well. In Patrick Califia's *Sex Changes*, he critiques Kate Bornstein's book [*Gender Outlaw*]. One of the things that he says which made such an impression on me, is that if trans women are going to go out and critique culture, they need to clean their own house, effectively. Those are his words, "They need to clean their own house." Effectively what he's saying is that trans women need to go get themselves an education in feminist theory. Maybe not even theory, but feminist activism, feminist ways of being. I think he's 100 percent right. Which is not to say that Kate Bornstein is not a feminist or anything like that, which might be how that might be read, but the thing is that there are a lot of trans women who aren't doing that. Even though I haven't yet personally become very familiar with trans men who are really anti-feminist themselves, I know that they exist. As incoherent as it might seem to me to inhabit the space of a FTM position and be anti-feminist... It just seems weird, but I know it exists. That's the complexity of this whole gender thing.

As I say it, it seems a little bit on the ineffectual side: "Please, trans women, educate yourselves and become feminists." But the truth of the matter is, as an activist, I don't want to give you the time of day unless you've really started to think about these things critically. It's just not going to work. I personally have a lot of difficulty with a lot of trans women. I think there's a great network of complexity there. There's a lot of age difference; there's the whole coming out thing; there's the problem of attempting to live in a gender that is feeling not correct for a person for many years. It boggles my mind that anybody could attempt to live in a gender that they feel is incorrect for forty or fifty years. That ultimately makes me really sad for that person.





Regardless, if this is about personal liberation, it has to be about everyone's liberation. I look at my own transition and I think, I couldn't be anti-abortion, for example, and still consider myself to be a trans activist in the way that I do now. Because the medical framework that governs trans people and is connected with me controlling my body, is the same network that governs the reproductive functions of women who may give birth, or may not. It's crucial to me that I maintain some dedication around those topics. I don't think that I want to go so far as to say that one can't be a trans person or a trans activist and be anti-abortion. People have their ethics. I'm not really interested in that. But the way that I look at the world, I see that there's a capitalist medical structure which governs these things. If it becomes impossible for a woman to get a completely clean and legal and safe abortion, it's going to follow soon after that I'm not going to be able to get the hormones that I need to maintain the body that I feel comfortable in. Maybe the step after that is changing how I am able to inhabit the body in the gender that I exist in without hormones. But currently for me now, that's not a reality. Maybe that's the next wave, the fourth or fifth wave of feminism. Who can say?

**Colliau:** Please talk a little bit about what it was like transitioning in Santa Cruz.

**Alexander:** I came to Santa Cruz about six to eight months after I began my initial transition. I kind of came here by accident. I just intended to move to northern California from southern California. Fate led me here. I had known Santa Cruz to be this "lesbian mecca" for quite some time. But at the time, this was 1993 when I ended up here, I really didn't have a good sense of where other trans people were to be found. I found a therapist in Marina Del Rey when I was in the south; I found a therapist up in San Francisco when I got up here. But I really hadn't found a trans community as such, until much after I had gotten here to Santa Cruz. But the more important part for me was to find a queer environment that I could be in, that I could be part of. That said, for the first year or so that I was here I wasn't intending to stay here very long, so I didn't make very many friends, didn't get much community. It wasn't until about 1995 that I began to get a foothold in doing activist work again, when I got involved with the SCLGBTCC. It wasn't a bad thing that I ended up here.

But I did not intentionally come to Santa Cruz for any specific, like queer reason, or anything like that. It was more a northern California, semi-metropolitan thing that had brought me up here from down south. In effect, I was looking for more of a queer community to engage myself in. Transitioning here was initially kind of difficult in that I had been part of a tiny lesbian community down south when I was at the University of



Redlands. We had a little tiny group of us; it was definitely not known as a queer-friendly school. So all the lesbians knew each other, basically. It was a much smaller world. The lesbian drama was just that much more intense, because it was so much of a smaller group. It was hard to try to come out in that community then as trans as well, even though I had a lot of acceptance. A lot of people prior to my being out as trans definitely spoke of me as like an honorary lesbian and this kind of thing.

When I got to Santa Cruz, I didn't have history with anybody. I was basically here to establish myself as myself. I'd go to places like Herland and feel somewhat on the outside. It's not like I was being asked specifically to justify my presence there. It was still a semi-welcoming environment. It was more of my own internal issues, my own issues of trying to figure out where I fit in as a queer woman in Santa Cruz, maybe feeling that I hadn't gotten to become, I don't know, woman enough to become a dyke, for example. So there was still a lot of discomfort for me in the beginning of my transition here.

**Colliau:** What about a trans community in Santa Cruz? Did you feel like you had a community to help you go through transitioning?

**Alexander:** This is probably where UCSC comes in most effectively. One of the problems with activism in general is that it becomes really easy to get fixated on a particular way of doing things, a particular way of doing activism, particular issues that are important. For example, I think Santa Cruz is known as kind of this lesbian mecca, and so it becomes very important to think about the ways that lesbian feminism had its renaissance of sorts in second wave feminism. I think a lot of the same issues have been replicated and replicated in terms of what has been important in the activism done in this town. It becomes very difficult to find a place for a trans identity within that. There's not a lot of established support for trans people in that history. That said, this community center down here was one of the first queer community centers anywhere to add transgender to the name of its center and add that to the mission. But there was a lot of embattlement around that. There were definitely people who were very, very angry about this and who wouldn't be part of the downtown Center. This is where a lot of university-types of activism come in, in that there tends to be a little bit more progressiveness to it, a little bit more of an openness to new things.

My arrival here in Santa Cruz had kind of two events that went concurrently: the breaking news of Brandon Teena's murder, and the publication of Kate Bornstein's



*Gender Outlaw* and everything that came along with that. These are both big things, even still, in the academy. We're constantly looking at these things and trying to figure out what these things mean for us as queer people, as trans people, as just people in general. Whether or not the people that were around me were specifically identifying as trans or not, most of my support was coming from people who were at UCSC. I worked for a publisher for awhile who had an internship program with UCSC students. This was probably the very first time that I had a really substantial connection to the University. I started hanging out a lot more on campus and going to events, and being more visible on campus at that point.

Almost wherever I go, even when I'm going on vacation, I end up at a university some place. There is so much progressiveness in the queer communities on campus. Not even just in the queer communities, there tends to be a lot more progressive attitude in almost any university you attend. I always gravitate to wherever that stuff is. So I'll go to visit friends in Baltimore and end up at the campus at Johns Hopkins, or I'll go to L.A. and I'll be visiting USC and UCLA. This is where I know I'm going to find people who are engaged in theory and trying to understand the world a little bit better from various perspectives. UCSC is probably one of the most amazing schools that I've seen. It's got its problems, clearly, but every place does. But the environment, the people have always been personally my best support, whether they're my friends who are interns at the publishing company that I worked at, or my co-facilitators within CLUH. Even certain classmates that I've had have been some of my strongest supporters, and the people who are more engaged in trying to figure out, from a theoretical perspective, how all this trans stuff begins to make sense in the larger cultural, historical context.

I haven't been aware of any faculty up here on campus that specifically identify as trans. I think that this is one of the things that happens within trans communities, probably more so than any other identity politics. I think that there's a greater division put between trans people than with any other segment of identity politics. I might be overstating this. A lot of times it's easy to overstate things within an identity politic structure. But, I don't think that I would have exactly the same difficulty in discussing trans issues with other trans people. I wouldn't have the same difficulty in finding people who could talk about these things on a personal level if I were speaking as an African-American activist, or certainly not as a queer activist. It's a lot easier for me to find common ground with a lesbian or gay faculty person than somebody who would be trans. It's a lot more difficult to be out. I'm hoping this is going to change over time.



We're also talking about a population that is an enormous minority. It's not always easy to be visible, and it's definitely not always safe to be out. If there have been trans faculty up at UCSC, I have never encountered them. Even so, even if there were, there's no guarantee that they would be in a department that I would have encountered. Which is not to say I don't have any interest in say, one of the biological sciences or economics or something like that. But I've got a multi-disciplinary bent on what I am looking to study. More often than not I'm not going to be going to the biology department to look for the people that I'm going to be engaging in academic discourse with. I'm not going to be looking at the economics world. At least not yet. [laughter]

If there were a trans faculty person in one of these departments, it would be... I'm envisioning it like this, if there were a celebrity faculty on campus, [like] Tom Lehrer—he's a mathematics professor who has been a songwriter, kind of a humorous songwriter forever and gained huge national reputation as that. I think that it would have the same character if I were to go to some trans faculty person in a different department, as if I were to go to Tom Lehrer and go like, "Wow, you teach math too." There would just be like this really stilted thing. I would be there just because he's a humorous songwriter, for example, and not necessarily engaged in the discipline which he is interested in teaching.

To fall back on this other analogy, if I were African American and going to another African-American professor who's in a completely different area, our only bond would be that identity and especially if they're not necessarily interested in exploring that identity through the discipline that I, the big fan, is interested in exploring, there's not going to be necessarily a whole lot of common ground. It's like, "Oh yes, right, great, we're both black and so, now what?" It was never a bigger shock to me than to go into a room full of people who were all trans-identified and think, I have nothing in common with these people. At the first support group I ever went to (this was back in southern California), I walked into the room and I looked around, and these were all people, all of them male-to-female identified, all of them, except for one person who was a partner of somebody else. It was great to have the "diversity" in the room, people who are all over the map in terms of age, race, and ethnicity, and even the degree to which they identified as trans. But there was no common ground. I didn't feel like I could talk to them about anything. It was a depressing moment. It was a horribly depressing moment for me. It was not something that I had been prepared for at all.



This is one of the reasons that it was very beneficial for me to come to a place like Santa Cruz, in which I could find people who were interested in the things I was interested in academically, who were able to treat me with respect even though they weren't necessarily engaged in the same identity that I was. I don't think that identity has ever been something that has been the most crucial in building of alliances. I think that it has a lot more to do with emotional, academic, intellectual, and political priorities. There're definitely a lot of trans people whom I've met in my life who are just not interested in being feminist, for example.

One of my personal greatest concerns is that I haven't been able to run into trans women very frequently who are engaged in feminist discourse of any kind. [As I mentioned earlier], I took the class, *Introduction to the Study of Women and Men in Society* [at USC] with Michael Messner and Barrie Thorne, who each have established pretty good reputations in terms of their work that they've done. My partner, Heather, and I both took this class. The syllabus wasn't even that great. I mean, we read *Death of a Salesman*, for crying out loud. There were some things that I had read before that I didn't feel were incredibly enlightening. But this course entirely changed the course of my life. This was concurrent with me coming out to my partner as trans. Effectively, it made a feminist out of me.

I think it was at that crucial moment that I was able to begin to think, if I'm going to become a woman, I'm going to become a feminist woman, and what does that mean? What does that mean for me as a trans person, and how I'm going to engage in the world? It's brought me to this question that I have for some trans women that I would even say is anti-feminist. When I say anti-feminist, I would say that that means that it represents an ideology which suggests that women are lesser than men, right? Which brings a question to my mind: if I'm a trans woman, and I am inhabiting an anti-feminist ideology, what does that say about my transition if I am becoming something I can't even respect? If I am something that I am even consciously thinking is worse than what I was before, it kind of suggests this downward mobility kind of thing. What kind of life is this? This is something that it's hard to bring up to somebody else because this is me putting my definition on somebody else. But in a lot of ways it's been very clear to me that there are trans women who are becoming something unrespectable to themselves, while they are attempting to struggle through this, this very difficult and almost incoherent understanding of the self within the sex and gender matrix that gives rise to



this transgender phenomenon anyway. I think it's incredibly, incredibly important. It should almost be part of the standards of care.

Feminism has a lot of problems built into the development of it, but it's always seemed to me that the crux of it is to offer women the respect that they haven't received throughout decades and decades of cultural development. I think that it would offer a lot of trans women a lot more self-respect to have some kind of feminist consciousness raised as they're going through this whole transition. It's been said that a lot of trans women have to deal with the conditions of, say, making sixty cents on the dollar, and they have to adjust to this reality. While I think that's true, I also think it's not incredibly true, in that I don't think that you *have* to adjust yourself to that reality. I think that it's something that you can continue to be in denial of. As a bio[logical] woman, you can continue to be in denial of it. I don't have to compare my salary to somebody else's. I'm going to move on and continue to do this. It's not so clear-cut as that—go and get your surgery and the next day your paycheck gets cut. In some ways I kind of wish it was as clearly defined as that. But the truth of the matter is that a lot of trans women spend so much living in their own little personal gender hell that they don't get to see a distinct cut. They're already living in freak land and so they're not making as much, and this kind of thing plays out. So they don't get to see a deliberate cut; they're always already making shitty wages.

**Colliau:** Is that how it was for you in Santa Cruz when you were transitioning, living in freak land?

**Alexander:** Immediately before I moved up here I was unemployable. I went for a year and a half effectively without a job. My partner was supporting both of us. It was really, really hard because I was definitely inhabiting this very incongruous gender identity. It made it very difficult for me to get a job. After I moved north, I was able to get temp jobs.

**Colliau:** Secretary jobs?

**Alexander:** Yes, always. Office assistant, administrative assistant, these kinds of things. Always office jobs, always temp jobs. It was a very difficult time in my life. There is that *Reality Bites* documented way of living life immediately after college. Everybody goes through that post-college breakdown. But I looked weird. They were supposed to be hiring some kind of boy and getting this... I don't even know how I appeared. But I always have this imaginary conversation that happens between the people who



interviewed me being like, “You know, that boy’s awfully effeminate,” and not just in some kind of gay boy way, just in this probably very disconcerting fashion. It was very difficult for me to get employed.

**Colliau:** So, the temp jobs that you had were in Santa Cruz and you were still being read as a boy at the time?

**Alexander:** No, no, because that was all post that transition. My joblessness period was in Redlands and I moved north to escape that. To get more autonomy in terms of transportation, because another thing is that at that point I didn’t have a vehicle of my own to drive myself around with. That was a second thing against me. Also, when I got up here, the Bay Area has a tendency to be a little more lax in terms of how they’re defining how people should appear. San Bernardino County is not the most gay-friendly place there’s ever been. There’s a lot less tolerance for breaking beyond those norms than there is in San Francisco and its outlying areas, and in Santa Cruz. I was able to get up here and get involved with businesses that were supposedly feminist-informed in how they did business. Or they were clearly out about being gay-owned. So I was a lot more able to connect with gender variant people, queer people, from a business context than I was in southern California. It made it a little easier to transition. That said, the first stable job that I had when I got here was a place that said it was feminist-informed, hired mostly women, like ninety to ninety-five percent of the people who worked there were women, which is really good. But the queer visibility was really low there. So much so that for a while I was the only queer person there, and it was never talked about. So much so that one of my co-workers was really shocked when I came out to her six months later. It was like, “You’re queer? You’re a lesbian?” I’m like, “Well, yes, that’s kind of what the whole short hair thing’s about.” It was weird to have to try and make myself visible as queer in an all-straight feminist environment. And this isn’t even coming out as trans, necessarily.

This is probably indicative of what tolerance does. Tolerance allows you to be a lot more freely mobile, but it doesn’t necessarily allow you to be out and vocal about what your life has been like. Certainly it wasn’t the case for me. I had to remain silent about those things, because it wasn’t necessarily appropriate for me to be talking about tranny stuff on the job, especially when at that time I wasn’t necessarily feeling safe and secure. I didn’t have a great support network at that time in my life. I didn’t have people to fall back on in case somebody freaked out at me because they found out I was trans and were not really able to understand that. All of my support network was outside, people



who were living in Illinois, southern California, New Jersey and Indiana, and all these random places.

There's good and bad that came with my coming to transition in Santa Cruz. All in all, I think it was a good place to complete that, such as I've completed it. When I say complete, I would say come into my own identity, and be able to think comfortably of myself as a woman, and for the rest of the world to think of me as a woman. It's not like I ever really had much of a problem passing here as female, even if it was as kind of a masculine female, as a butch dyke, whatever place they were seeing me inhabit. There were not very many places where I had to answer for myself, in terms of what I was. I was just able to be taken for whatever, and then everybody moved on. I think that happens for a lot of trans people who end up in Santa Cruz. The down side is that we're not always necessarily visible, and it's very difficult to approach each other. There's a dynamic which exists, where it's not necessarily safe to be called out as a trans person. For somebody else to go, "Hey, you're trans, aren't you?" For me as a trans person to call somebody else out like that, it's not comfortable because what if I'm wrong? There's all kinds of things like that that come along with it.

I've been working at the Santa Cruz Diner for the last six months or so. Since 1995, I've definitely been able to call myself an activist in Santa Cruz. The way that I've been an activist is through a lot of established routes. I've been on boards of directors. I've been involved with organizations like CLUH where I go and do workshops. I've done trans workshops on campus, off campus, in my classes. I had a Marx class, for example, where I've had to bring a lot of my queer and trans issues and spin those through a Marxist kind of context. A lot of these normal ways of doing activism have been done.

[Anyway] I'm working at the diner; I'm graveyard shift at the diner. First of all, this is not something that I could've done early in my transition, when it would have been more normal for me to do a job like this, to work minimum wage plus tips, to be at that pay scale. It wouldn't have been safe, because I wouldn't have been able to confront a table necessarily and deal with the kind of response that would come from somebody who's not necessarily very gender friendly or non-normativeness friendly. Those moments would be too frightening, too risky. What I've been able to find myself doing a lot more since I've been through a lot, and since I'm a lot more comfortable in my identity, is to engage in dialogue and engage in discussion with my patrons at the diner a little more effectively. There have been moments. Early in my career there, I was stopped and harassed by one of my customers whose girlfriend was trying to get him to shut up,





but he was like, “I’m not going to get served by *that*,” and doing this kind of stuff. His girlfriend really freaked out. She said, “Shut-up! Just don’t do that. That’s really fucked up of you to do this.” It definitely brought out a lot of my issues around not feeling safe and wondering if I’m going to have to defend myself.

A couple of weeks ago, I had some hillbilly patrons come in, like gun-toting guys from out of town, in the middle of the night, really loud, really obnoxious. At the same time, there was a couple, UCSC students, definitely heterosexual and together. They were holding hands across the table and all this really cute stuff. These are my only patrons in the diner. And these guys come in, and one of them, after I serve them their food, asks me, “What gender are you?” Immediately, I’m on edge because these are guys who could really just do a lot of damage to me if they decided they were going to commit violence. A lot of these things come to mind. I think of Matthew Shepherd and Brandon Teena a lot in those moments. I turned to him and I told him, “I’m femme.” And he starts musing aloud about this. I don’t remember exactly what he was all saying, but I walked away from him, and a moment later, I just turned and asked him, “So, what makes you think I’m female?” Which is like this really incredibly confrontational statement, right? I’m not letting this go. Clearly, I’m going to make him work some more. And he starts musing aloud about this, about what he thinks sex and gender is, and how he figured this stuff out. And the male of this UCSC student cute couple pops his little head up and goes, “Gender is a social construct!” This guy, he just leans over his shoulder and goes, “No, it’s not.” And starts trying to figure out-loud how gender is not a social construct. Then the girl of the couple, she pipes up and goes, “Yes, gender is a social construct. Sex is a biological fact, but gender is a social thing.” And suddenly this whole conversation is going on without me even being involved, between my patrons, about what sex and gender are.

I’ve initiated this, because something about my presentation was not necessarily normatively gendered still. After this goes on for a little bit, I’m thinking, this is amazing; this is marvelous. Clearly there’re some things that are going on through UCSC, and I don’t know whether it’s just because of the women’s studies classes, or if these classes have informed other classes. But clearly, this is something that is being really filtered down. I don’t even know what subject these kids were studying. But this is an idea that has gotten to them. I come back around, and this guy starts apologizing to me. He’s like, “Well, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you or anything like that.” I said, “No, I’m not offended by it. It’s been a long time since somebody’s called my gender into question.” I



said, "So long as I'm not going to get my ass kicked for any of this stuff, I'm fine talking about it." And these hillbilly guys, these guys from wherever, Colorado, who were just in town to sell guns or something like that, look at each other and are like, "People get their asses kicked for this?" I tell them "Yes, some people, they get killed because somebody else can't understand whether they're a boy or they're a girl. They'll get *killed* for this." And this is a shocking thing to me. They looked at each other and they're like, "That's fucked up." Here's this really amazing moment that was fueled, not by whatever gender embodiment I'm representing, but by the discussion that these kids are having with these guys.

This is just a random thing, and I'm thinking there is no workshop in the world that probably would've gotten these guys to this point. They're just randomly coming into a diner at three in the morning and having this moment. I'm thinking this is the kind of activism that I really want to be doing because, yes, it's more important for organizations to exist and for them to be able to have funding to put on events and everything. But I've put on so many events and I've gotten to the point where I feel like I'm often preaching to the choir. Last year I brought so many trans-identified people, mostly to campus. I brought Del LaGrace Volcano. I helped bring James Green and Susan Stryker to give these huge things on campus. But largely these are people who are speaking to people who already have some sense of what's going on. It's great to hear James and Susan and whoever else speak about these things, and it might help us advance theoretically a little bit more, but I'm not speaking to the hillbillies from Colorado. Depending on where your activism is geared, ultimately I would like it to be a safe enough world where trans people don't have to worry about being killed. Then we can worry about other stuff, then we can worry about employment issues and marriage issues and all these other things.

But still, we're dealing in a world where we can be killed in the middle of the street with people all around us, such as what happened in New York City last year with a trans woman prostitute [Amanda Milan, died June 18, 2000, NYC]. People watched this happen, in the middle of the street. She was stabbed and murdered and left for dead. She died. This is still something that I have to be concerned about, as a trans person. This also further complicated by the fact that I'm queer and I'm a woman. Those are categories which also put me at risk for physical violence, random and sexualized violence. If you just want to count it as potential strikes against me, there's three. It's definitely something that I either have to be incredibly concerned about, or I have to try



to move on without getting myself debilitated by worrying about [it]. I'm hoping that this means that at some point in the future these guys are going to go back to wherever they came from, and some trans person that they might encounter, or some queer person that they are not be able to understand, is going to not get beaten up by them. Or they are going to maybe get in the way of some friends of theirs who would do the same kind of thing to some random trans person that they might encounter. So, it's really transformed my idea of how I want to continue to do the activism that I want to do. It's certainly a lot more immediately satisfying to see the results, rather than to have to try and work on a grant proposal and try and get events together and see who shows up.

**Colliau:** Are there any highlights from the activism you've done on campus, like with CLUH in particular, that you want to talk about?

**Alexander:** CLUH itself I would like to talk a little bit about. It was amazing to see how CLUH was revamped. The students went and revised CLUH into its semi-current model, or at least the model I was introduced to in 2000. It was a really amazingly effective workshop model. I was just stunned by it, because it incorporated all kinds of elements: anti-racism, along with the queer stuff and a trans thing, an analysis of gender that hadn't entered into a lot of the workshops that I'd done. It made an environment where I could speak a little more freely about the things that are on my mind about gender and how it's developed, and gave me a tool to be able to connect it to other people's understandings of their own oppressions. An incredibly progressive model. It really helped that there was a lot of trans consciousness among the people who were organizing it. I'm sure that I've helped further that. I don't know exactly how, because it wasn't deliberately my one intent to go well, I'm going to go and queer this a little further because I've got all of this tranny stuff going on. I know that there hasn't been a lot of MTF trans presence in CLUH apart from me. A lot more of an FTM thing, kind of this feminism/FTM/MTF rift. But the work that I've been able to do through CLUH was very similar to what I was just talking about in terms of seeing immediate results. Being able to go into a workshop and in the space of an hour and a half get people talking about stuff they would never understand, never think about before. And be able to be there as a trans person, and be able to introduce myself as such, and get them immediately talking about issues that are important to me as a trans person, and not things like, "So, do you pee standing up?" Or, "How do you have sex?" These kinds of things which are understandable questions but not really relevant to anything. Because who cares how I pee, except for me, really? So long as I can pee, then I'm fine. We don't



need to discuss this. I don't have to ask that of anybody else. I mean, you would never ask somebody of another racial category, "So, how do you pee?" You want to know more necessarily, like, "How do you make a living," and "How do you function in a racist paradigm?" And, even then we can talk about how trans people have to encounter this whole urinary world [laughter] in a strictly policed gendered world. There's a lot that goes on there, but the day-to-day functions of how your body relieves itself, that's thoroughly irrelevant.

So, this has been one of the great things about CLUH, being able to get at the heart of a lot of this, a lot more quickly with people who would never, ever otherwise meet a trans person. Maybe even never otherwise meet and talk to a queer person without resistance.

I want to talk on a little bit about the feminism, FTM, MTF thing. I've talked a little bit about how I think that feminism is incredibly necessary for MTF folks to come to a feminist understanding of themselves as women. The thing is that a lot of FTM's are able to. Since most of the FTM's I've known are also university-educated, this complicates it a little bit, and so I want to recognize that as I make this statement. But even so, a lot of them are incredibly feminist-informed. A lot of these people have either lived as dykes or lesbians for some amount of time, and so have that characteristic to how they're becoming men. I think that it's usually a pretty common characteristic, for each of these FTM folks to live with gender oppression as a female-bodied person through school, and trying to negotiate this institutionalized sexism which is in their schools and their churches and their families. This is how feminism got its start. A lot of people who are born female went, "Wait, this is not right. I don't need this kind of oppression in my life. I want to get paid better and I want to have more choices over how my body functions and all these other things."

**Colliau:** Is there anything else you want to talk about?

**Alexander:** I just quickly want to respond to the issue of activism versus the academy, as if they are separate entities. Anyone who thinks the academy is unable to be an effective, "real-world" place for activism should take a look at how information and discussion on transgender folks have proliferated in the past decade, especially here in Santa Cruz. [What] we've not really talked about yet too much is the whiteness issue. We were going to talk about this in the light of being a feminist as well, because feminism has come under fire for being race- and class-specific, so much so that other terms such as "womanist" have cropped up. So when I say feminist, I am trying to think of a feminism



that is not so rooted in a particular race and class dynamic, but one that is open to redefinition. I know that there're some people who are, maybe semi-feminist minded who just dismiss that. [They think] feminism is a racist and classist thing; we are something else entirely. I really want to think about that in a more progressive and dynamic light, in the same way that I want to talk about transexualism, transgenderism in not so much of a race and class-bound kind of terminology. In any moment you're stuck in your historical context, you're stuck with a raced and classed and gendered idea of who we are and how we are going to function. I'm trans-identified. I'm trying to break out of this gendered system that was foisted upon me. I think it would be just as difficult for me to say okay, so now this is the way to be a woman, right, this is *the* way to be a woman, as a trans person, and then not allow that to be redefined by other people and have my ideas changed on this by what I see from other people.

This is both the blessing and the curse of diversity. If you're going to actually be diverse, you're going to have to really work at it and you're going to have to really try and expand your own definitions and your own thinking about things, and think that you're not necessarily always right. It's an easy thing to talk about, but it's a very difficult thing to do. I *know* that a lot of what I read in feminist discourse and a lot of what I've read in transgender discourse is incredibly, incredibly class-based. We're talking about upper, upper class. Wealthy people. They're defining and policing what gender is supposed to be anyway. I mean, look at how difficult it is to get your passport changed, and who's going to even need a passport anyway? The people who can actually afford to get out of the country, right? This is across the board the most difficult thing for a person to get changed when they go and change their gender. It's something that the trans communities are beginning to deal with.

In some ways they're not prepared yet to deal with a lot of this stuff. Because pretty much we're all just trying to fit into a larger gender context. It's a difficult system to bug regardless of how gender is cast through your particular economic and ethnic idea of what gender you inhabit is supposed to be. It's going to be very difficult for me to break out of my own middle-class, white idea of what kind of woman I want to be, and help other people break out of their own gender prison into something they at least feel a little more liberated in being. One of the things that I think happens within trans worlds that I'm hoping is changing a little bit more in Santa Cruz is, and not just in Santa Cruz, I think this is just generally speaking...is that we need to be able to move a little bit more beyond these definitions that we've already created.



Here's the example that I think is maybe best. I met the word *transsexual* when I was in my late childhood, early teens. This is probably when I discovered—oh, this is what I am. I tried to make myself meet this definition. I could still be at this point in my life thinking, okay, I am a transsexual, and trying to make myself meet what that means, or what I think that means to other people. But I've kind of met that definition, moved past it, for a while into transgender, and right now I'm defining myself as a trannyfemme. Which is a word that I think defines both my sex (tranny) and my gender (femme), and represents me in some way. I'm hoping that I come up with more terms as my life continues and progresses, to talk about myself in more interesting and different ways. Maybe a word that's going to more clearly identify me along other axes of positionality that are out there, that might even be necessary for me to talk sensibly about what my gender necessarily is. It's not just about me being able to define that; it's about other people being able to define that. I spend a lot of time in academic settings, which are incredibly, incredibly biased towards a middle-class, white thing. This is not just a problem with the academy. All of the people who are not white are pushed off to the sides. Even if they're even present in the schools themselves, they're off someplace else. This was a problem in my grade schools, in my high schools, even into some collegiate atmospheres. I think it's a really, really tragic thing because it limits me [as] an activist, a progressive and a human being. It doesn't help me to get beyond fears and also of my own ideas of myself as universal, which is easy to get into, and is completely false. None of us inhabit the universal position, it's just some of us are given this idea that you can do that. I've seen it happen in the queer community. There're definitely people that'll think that they're going to be doing good for everybody in the community. It's just not always the case. Sometimes that ideology has incredibly damaging effects. And that's not an activism that I'm interested in embodying.