

Student Interviewer
Research Methods-Chapkis
Transcription
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Interview With Lee Leveille on Nov. 2018 at the WGS office in Portland, ME.

SI: Hello we are recording. My name is [REDACTED]. [REDACTED].
Today is Nov. 17, 2018 and I'm interviewing

LL: Lee Leveille.

SI: I would like to remind you that you can stop the interview at anytime. You can refuse a question.. Basically you're in control of what's happening and where the information goes at the end of the day. At any point you want to end the interview at anytime just say so, that's totally fine. In the event that we go over time, and you have more to say, we can schedule another interview in the future. Do you consent to this interview?

LL: Yeah, realistically speaking.

AH: Excellent. Ok. Alright, Well how old are you, where did you grow up?

LL: I'm thirty, as of June. As for where I grew up, it kind of depends on how far back we go. Originally I'm Southern California-- San Diego region. I was born to a Navy family on both side. I was born right on the base. Things were complicated for a few years while I was over there because both of my parents were in the military and we had the first Gulf War that wound up happening not long afterward, so there were frequent deployments. The officers tried to alternate between them so there would always be one guardian in the country, but sometime it didn't always work out that way so I would end up spending time with my Grandmother up in Washington, or I would stay down South with nannies, that sort of thing. I have a younger brother who is about 4 years younger than me. Don't really remember a whole lot about San Diego, I'll admit. I do remember spending a lot of time with like the neighborhood families. So most of my neighborhood, there was a lot of mixture of cultures. Fair number of my neighbors were Mexican families, and I spent a lot of time with them when I wasn't spending time with my own family. So I kind of grew up in multiple worlds so to speak, so when I wound up coming Maine, around age 9 or 10, it was a this huge culture shock. Because, tiny little town in the middle of nowhere it seemed, over in Sumner, Maine. There was not a single person of color in the entire town. Not one. It was so strange to me. At that point, you know, I was the only foreigner in the entire area.

SI: Did your move to Maine correspond with a relocation of your parents by the service?

LL: Yeah, originally both of my parents were to be stationed over in Guam. They realized they didn't want to uproot the entire family and bring them to Guam for us to grow up there, so they took their honorable discharges and we ended up moving to Maine. My dad is from Mechanic Falls so we were closer to his family this way, and it was one of the areas where my Mom could find work. So.

[Redacted]

SI: Ok. Do you have a relationship with your sibling?

LL: Off and on, yeah. Like we were pretty close in elementary school. High school was kind of strained because I had a lot of my own stuff going on and when he enlisted in the Air Force we tried to maintain a relationship long distance, while he was deployed overseas as well. We are not always in touch right now but that's largely because he has a life, I have a life, and sometimes things just fall by the wayside a little bit, you know? But we are reasonably close, considering siblings.

SI: Yeah, did he show up for you in ways during time where you were not particularly seen by other parts of your family.

LL: Mmmm.....ya know, I don't really know.

SI: Yeah. K. Um, I guess I should have started off with this: what are your pronouns?

LL: [Laughter] That is one of the most common questions I am asked. So I don't actually have a preferred set of pronouns, which has a tendency to throw everyone for a loop whenever they ask.

SI: Yeah, understandable, but also.-- Yeah, do you want to talk about why you don't have a preferred set of pronouns?

LL: Pretty much ever since middle school/high school I have been kind of walking through different gender worlds, so to speak. Like, I've got the essences of femininity in some aspects but the essences of masculinity in other aspects, and as a result, I have a tendency to be read in a number of different ways. Over time, I have just learned to go with the flow and base it off of how other people read me. I have found that if I try to focus too much on one core identity and one core set of pronouns, it just stresses me out further. And then I go out to various circumstances again, where i'm read one way or another, and it feels like i'm getting misgendered if I'm not read a certain way. And that just throws my anxiety through the roof, so I had to--excuse my language-- radically stop giving a fuck. And it works out a lot better in the end.

SI: Excellent. So can we talk about gender in general? Like how has your experience with gender--[pause] I'm sorry. I have a direction that i would like to head with that but like, how do

you deal with being misgendered? How has your experience walking these worlds shaped your interactions with your community, strangers, friends?

LL: Basically, my approach to it is something I stole from other people through [Wellness Recovery Action Plan] groups called Q TIPS: Quit Taking It Personally. In the moment, what matters more is the relationship with the other person not necessarily how I am been read and the feelings it brings up in me. I also realize that I have the power to control my reactions to other people especially if they mean well and in a lot of instances they do, they just don't know any better and that's perfectly fine. So i just take inventory of how I'm feeling in the back of my head and compartmentalize it so i can deal with it later if i really need to but in the moment sometimes what seems to matter more is what it is were trying to do together and not just how i feel when I'm having that kind of internal reactivity going on.

SI: Yeah, it can really take the wind out of a movement. The sails. What were your first realizations about gender like for you?

LL: Lets see, it's kind of hard to pinpoint a specific instance for the simple fact that when i was younger did really have this understanding of what other people deemed to be gender or gender roles or anything like that. Since I'm also autistic there's a lot of underlying social rules that go on and people don't exactly come with manuals so I have no idea what their thinking unless it's like explicitly out there for me to be able to read. Right. I can't really read between the lines and unfortunately a lot of gender roles has a tendency to fall between the line. So my household growing up was pretty gender neutral. I got a lot of messages from both my mother and my father that is was perfectly fine to do whatever I wanted. As long as it was safe reasonably speaking, and I was happy, and I grew up learning about computers and operating DOS ever since I could walk. Growing up with Star-Trek, but on the same token I had an easy bake oven, I had Barbies. It doesn't really matter. I tended to fall into multiple categories but this didn't always go along well with my peers. My peers had a more strict understanding of gender roles when I was in Sumner. And so they had a tendency to try to hammer them into me but it never really felt comfortable. I didn't even have words for what i was experience until I was about 15 or 16. So high school and I folded into internet communities to figure out what is going on in my head. What are these categories supposed to mean? How do I feel about everything that is going on? I was in a lost of ways dysphoric about my body. I don't how much of that is from how I was treated when I was young vs. some sort of innate identity or something like that. So, I'm trying to think, yeah, it was around age 15 or 16 when I came across the transgender community and there were only a couple of words that were out there, in my experience. And it was female-to-male, male-to-female. There were a couple of people that called themselves genderqueer, it wasn't common or well received. The only thing I could fit myself into was female-to-male, but that didn't really fit either, so I don't know. The whole thing is just this massive ball of yarn all tangled up and there's no clear beginning or end point in any of it.

AH: What were the online communities?

LL: Lets see, so there was Susan's place. Not an environment that I'd recommend to people, I was a member of an online debate guild of some sorts, that focuses more on LGBT issues and one of my areas of focus on that little guild there was religion, as well. I would pull a lot of my argument from understanding the religious arguments that other people make, but going back to the original scripture, sometimes the original translations, and just pointing out that they don't exactly match what other people's arguments are, so that sort of became one of my niches so to speak.

SI: Nice. Yeah, I remember like, Live Journal or something.

LL: Yeah, I never really got involved with the trans community on Live Journal. I had my own but it wasn't really public, it was just for me and a couple of friends. I never really got into the communities there .

SI: I wanted to ask about your family. You said you didn't really get a lot of messaging about gender norms from them, did you get support from them, do you think they saw you?

LL: I did get a lot of support from them, like they didn't always understand what was going on with me but part of that was that I wasn't really communicating that to them either. They never really had a problem with what I wanted to do, wanted to wear. They figured there was no really harm in it. I mean, it was my mother that taught my dad how to paint cars and spot weld and stuff. She was the carpenter in the family. They were supportive to a point. They didn't really oppose me having any sort of girlfriends or boyfriends coming home unless well, outside of the typical parents opposing gf bf coming home in high school but I think that's kind of standard. There was one point during high school. I came out to my parents twice: once for sexuality purposes, no, technically twice for gender purposes, but only twice during high school. First time I came out, I came out as bisexual. Don't really consider myself to be that anymore but, I was functionally bisexual at the time around age 15 and my mom was really supportive of that. She was the first person I told and was like sure, ok whatever. I came out to my mom as transgender around 16/17. She was supportive of that too, she did hesitate a little bit, not because she didn't accept me, it was more like this is going to be a very difficult road for you and I feel empathy about how you're going to be facing troubles in the future. We're still behind you 110% but this is not going to be easy to get through given how society is right now. And that message has been clear and consistent for like the last 15 years as well even when I came out the second time, I was more open to my friends, the rest of my family, making it known that I'm going to go ahead and transition now. They were right on board with all of that too. It's mostly my extended family that we don't always see eye to eye with. My immediate family is cool.

SI: You said your extended family on your dad's side is in and around Sumner?

LL: right no. They're in central Maine, or at least at the time they were. Folks have spread out a little bit right now.

SI: Do you have contact with those people?

LL: No. Nowadays right now.

SI: But you're not like bumping into them at the grocery store or anything?

LL: No.

SI: Nice, nice.

LL: I'm not sure they would even recognize me if we did.

SI: Yeah, yup, that's an element for sure. Do you want to talk about sexuality for a little bit? You said that when you were a teenage you came out as bisexual. Deconstructing the binary will throw a wrench in anything that is bi-nary---

LL: Ehhh, well...in terms of sexuality it was less about walking in multiple worlds, and more about messages from trauma that i ended up getting a lot of. So in terms of dealing with men for instance, in terms of sexuality, it's not really something that i feel comfortable with, it's just sort of something that i've learned to go along with. I'm not necessarily attracted to them it's just that i've gotten consistent messages from peers and outsiders that I'm supposed to be open and available to men if that's what they want, so you just sort of go along with it after a while. My actual attractions are more centered towards women. I Would be open to dating a trans man, and i would actually prefer dating someone who has experiences similar to mien because i feel like we could understand each other in some ways. But over all I've had to sort of apply the radically not giving a fuck thing to sexuality too cause trying to figure out what specific label what my sexuality it also just way to stressful, SO WHATEVER just whatever .Sometimes I feel like with my peers there's so much heavy focus on trying to figure out what box a person fits in, that its more stress than it's worth really.

SI: Ha, yeah, and dating is stressful, or at least it can be.

LL: I wouldn't know, I haven't dated in years. I put that on hold.

SI: Why?

LL: I had a lot of baggage to work though. I needed to work on understanding what healthy and respectful relationships were like before i started to actually go into a long term relationship against. Because thinking back I don't think I've had a single healthy romantic or sexual relationship. Yeah, not one. I realized after my third abusive relationship, that something was up. Something needed to be sorted out here and i need to learn how to finally say no to people. So i stopped dating and to work on how to repair my life. And figure out where I sort of fit into the whole the whole things , instead of what other people want me to fit into. I feel like I've come out of it better in the long run, it's just, now dating is not even on my radar.

SI: So you mentioned in your intake form that you wanted to talk about Domestic Abuse is LGBTQ relationships is that something you still want to discuss?

LL: Yeah, reasonably speaking. So let's see. I've dated like men, women, trans people, non binary people, pretty much right across the board and I've noticed in my personal experiences that abuse tends to take on different faces depending upon the dynamic of the relationships so to speak. One of my first relationships was with a high school girl all the way over in, I want to say Denmark, or was it the Netherlands—I don't remember, I was like fifteen at the time. This was just when I was first starting to explore things, but since it was a long-distance relationship it meant that I could just kind of put a wall between me and what I was trying to do, so to speak so it didn't really have any sort of direct implications on me. That relationship probably didn't go very well. She had this strange idea of wanting to commit couples suicide in a church, and I'm just like "okay I don't think this is going to work out so well." During that relationship there was a guy in high school who noticed that the relationship wasn't healthy and so he got on his shining armor white horse, so to speak, came in to rescue me from this woman and honestly he wasn't any better. The only difference was that he was physically there, versus there being an ocean between us. And so, you know he was kind of questioning his sexuality at the same time, and I was questioning my sexuality and my gender at that point and there were these undertones where, you know, on the surface he said that he was accepting of how I would view myself and he would support me through all of it but there was a lot of denial on his end, too, and so it became clear that he was more interested in the traditional het relationship, two-and-a-half kids and a family dog sort of environment and after a while, you know, enough was enough. I was probably one of the first relationships that I personally broke off because I realized that I wasn't happy. And it was after he told me that he would never be able to see me as a man, so to speak. And I'm like, okay, fine, bye. After that, I started dating a trans woman. We met through that online guild actually, and so we kind of hit it off in a number of ways. But there was another member of that guild who kind of latched onto her and later latched onto me. I took me a while to realize later that they were a chaser and I just didn't pick up on the fact because they also identified as trans. But it became clear after a while that their primary interest in me and my partner at the time, my girlfriend, was that they could try to amplify some of the gender stereotypes with us and that was probably one of the most difficult relationships to get through because there was emotional abuse, there was sexual abuse, there was all sorts of things right across the board. And a lot of it also had to tie in with dysphoria and gender as well because they began to weaponize that against both me and my girlfriend, while somehow struggling with their own as well and it was just, the whole thing was a mess.

SI: And this relationship started online in this guild, was it solely internet-based?

LL: No, so we were reasonably close, physically, so to speak. I wound up going to college for a brief period of time down at Rochester institute of technology. And the other partner was right in Toronto, so, Greyhound bus away. And so there were time where we would actually take the Greyhound bus to go up there for a weekend and we would come back. So a lot of the relationship between that period would be on things like Skype and stuff like that doing video calls, and then the rest of it was weekend visits.

SI: So it was also another layer outside of heteronormativity and also non-monogamous, right?

LL: Wow, yeah. I mean at the time I wasn't really sure what I was into or getting myself into. I just kind of went with things and I guess that was my experimentation phase, maybe a couple of years delayed, but yeah it was my experimentation phase. Probably not for me. Sometimes you gotta try it to know it.

SI: So, you just decided to call it and said no, no more, I'm not gonna do this. Did you, what was your process like around...Did you have to advocate for yourself or did you have support?

LL: In terms of that particular relationship and calling it off, or..?

SI: Yeah.

LL: So, it's complicated. I wasn't doing all that great mentally. In part because of all the abuse that was going on, and after a while, you know, I did wind up realizing that the relationship was very one-sided, so to speak. They had their own mental stuff going on, it was always expected of me and my girlfriend to be supportive of them. They didn't really support us all that much, and yet they kept talking about how I was fragile and weak, and stuff like that. And they weaponized that against me, too. And so there was this moment where, you know, I wasn't doing well. I needed support, and I wound up reaching out to support, and their attitude just completely flipped. After a while, after hours of that conversation going on with them yelling at me, screaming at me over voice chat, I'm just like "No, I'm done." They actually asked to leave the relationship. They were the one that asked to leave the relationship. I'm like "Ok, fine." Just two words, fine. And about an hour or so in, they realized their mistake. Suddenly they wanted me back. I'm like "Nope, sorry." Blocked them on all sorts of stuff. They started going after my girlfriend. Wound up breaking into their Skype account. They gave me their password, so why not? Wound up breaking into the Skype account so that I could lock them out of the account, block my girlfriend so that they would stop yelling at her. And it probably took a few months for me to help her break off the relationship as well, but yeah.

SI: Did the two of you have outside support—you said you had support, and I'm wondering what that looked like. Did you have people at RIT or were there friends in community?

LL: There were mutual friends, so to speak, I don't really have communication with them anymore.

SI: And what type of support? What did that support take on? What role did that support—what did it look like? Were they just telling you that you're great? Were they pointing out behaviors?

LL: I can't really remember.

SI: Okay. Do you think that—I heard that this person was a chaser and that gender, particularly around trans stuff, was an element of that abuse. That was a leverage point, and some other things where they were targeting your emotional vulnerability.

LL: Mhmm

AH: So you mentioned that you are autistic-- do you wonder if that played a role. Where there other precipitating factors?

LL: I mean it probably did play a role. I've had to train myself over the years to see the warning signs in other people. I didn't have the experience I needed to know what the warning signs were. So it was pretty easy for them to weasel their way in, so to speak. If i could pick up on what exactly was going on.

SI: Is picking up on those things more difficult in a setting where you are not always in person?

LL: Honestly, online is probably easier for the simple fact that I can not read the text so to speak. For some reason having the language in front of me is easier to pick up on than body language.

SI: So I'm wondering--I'm Thinking about community and support and all this stuff, I think it might be a cool intro into talking about the work you are doing now, with peer support. Do you want to talk about it?

LL: So like my current job so to speak. In terms of my current job, I'm an intentional peer support specialist. What it does is takes elements of natural peer support and turns it into an intentional process. With an actual framework behind it. So you've got the essences of healthy balanced relationships but you purposefully work towards fostering those in the individuals you are meeting up with one on one. There's three key principles to it and four tasks you have to try to work through. The principals involved learning aside one another rather than performing a helping role. There's shared responsibility of maintaining the relationship instead of focusing on the needs of the individual because when you focus on the individual it becomes imbalanced so you have to try to balance that off with each other. And there's trying to approach the future with a sense of hope and possibility instead of constantly running away from the things your afraid of . All of those fold into the focuses of how you practice peer support. So you work on building connection with people, establishing a relation where you have that sort of empathy and rapport for each other. After that point you start to learn more about one another's world view. You learn about how they perceive the world. you learn about theirs. And you have the opportunity to kind of challenge one another one certain things, push each other outside of our comfort zone, in order to foster learning in a safe nonjudgmental environment, There is focusing on mutuality- beings able to mutually benefit from the relationship instead of focusing on the individual. Trying to find common ground between people. What are some of the things you like to do together? What Are the sort of things you can learn from each other? That sort of thing. And then the last one focusing on moving towards what we actually want in life instead of just what are we

constantly running away from right. So say originally I want a good paying job right, in essence like really just running away from poverty if you think about it but if you try to identify the things in your life that really give you personal drive and meaning and they give you a sense of, what's the right word for it, i don't want to say hope again cause that's just repetitive but just like a sense of purpose so to speak. You know, you can really start to empower each other and work towards a better future in the long run and so I do that kind of one-on-one with people. Just casual chats so to speak. Building a social relationship with them. I've done that in an number of different contexts for a number of years now.

SI: Do you think that those are skills that you've cultivated over your life and that you bring to this, is this a framework that you were like wow, this is novel and new and im gonna...

LL: yes and no. what i realized when I came across intentional peer support in college. I am working on my bachelors in psychology and community studies right. And my original purpose for going into psychology is because people don't come with manuals. Psychology teaches you how people think right, this is me building my manual for understanding how the world works and at the same time im able to start working on advocacy in the community and pushing toward actual change in the society. Working on the greater good, so to speak. And as the same time, I was providing peer support in various ways to members of the LGBTQ community that were questioning themselves, domestic violence survivors that were currently stuck in relationships and wanting out and I would kind of guide them through that one on one anonymously and when I started to look into what peer support was I found intentional peer suppose and was like, wait, there's a framework for what i've been doing this entire time, COOL. So i started looking into that a little more, realizing it's a really powerful framework for being able to understand and build healthy relationships and so you know, I pretty much use it as context for establishing relationships professionally, family, friends, everywhere.

SI: Yeah, it applies, for sure. Um so, this is a very laser beam questions, but do you feel you have a sense of meaning and purpose? Are there times in your life--I mean, do you think there are times in your life you've felt it more or less.

LL: Nowadays I kind of do. I've figured out what framework works for me. I'm able to start focusing on that and how I want to apply it to the LGBTQ community. Trying to repair rifts between different members of the community so to speak. For a long time before that, we're talking 10-15 years I really had no idea what I was doing with myself. What was going on .. I was still really confused about the world, confused about myself, didn't know what I wanted to do for a career. The first time I went to college I was in information technology and that did last very long. Then I started working retail for a while and then I started going into customer service for IT for a while and I thought that was going to be my niche and then was like, I don't want to be a code monkey. That's just-- no I don't want to be a code monkey for the rest of my life. I don't want to be miserable. So I started pursuing human services for a while, right, to see if I could get into case management but when I started doing the interviews of case managers and how it was being practiced like logistically within nonprofits I realized that wasn't really my comfort zone either so I started going into psychology more generally and figure out exactly

where I want to go with it. It's only the last, I want to say 2-3 years, where I started getting a sense of what I really want to do with my life. I've got the intentional peer support background, but long term I want to go into research myself. Probably public health for right now and I do want to focus on some of the things that the LGBT community has had to struggle with over the years, somethings that aren't really being focused on that much. You know, community trauma and the impact it can have on the sense of identity. The strange kind of dynamics of domestic violence in LGBTQ relationships. How that can impact a person's sense of self long term That sort of thing. I m also curious to see how different people respond to things like homophobia in society and transphobia, how that impacts their sense of self. I don't know. [pause] The whole thing, it's kind of a work in progress. Everything is a work in progress. MY life is a work in progress.

SI: So is life. Yeah. Umm, is the theme of trauma, community trauma even, particularly in queer community, it sounds like maybe your interest in the research is also personal. Do you.. Correct me if I'm wrong, I heard you say you didn't have the support. Is that maybe true?

LL: Community wise that may be true. When i was in sumner, for instance, I was the only obviously LGBT person in the entire of my school So as a result I was targeted pretty bad by blatant homophobia, all that fun stuff. When I tried to reach out to the school system or my friends for support I was met with silence the entire time. It was [pause] not fun. [pause].

SI: And is that some of the impetus on wanting to make progress on that?

LL: I want to say, yeah. So like, over the years I've been reading up on a lot of people's different experiences and finding out that my story is far from unusual. There is a lot of us that end up getting these kinds of messages from society and I don't know, I feel like there should be a sense of kinship between us instead of constant divisions and if there is a way we can work on building that kinship among each other, especially in a public fashion, cause there's more strength in unity and solidarity with each other instead of trying to go about it all on our own. And then, in building those relationships, it also means we can build a community of support for each other. To kind of makeup for a lot of the things that went wrong when we were all younger.

SI: Mhmm Are there places now, so you have got work in the peer support, are you still in school?

LL: Till about december, yeah.

SI: What's in december?

[Laughs]

LL: I'll finally finish my Bachelor Program in December. Sure took long enough but yeah.

SI: Congratulations. Yeah, thats a big deal.

LL: Yeah, thanks. considering my first attempt at college did not go well and this is basically ten years in the making-- Yeah. [laughter]

SI: Same. [Laughter]

LL: Thanks.

SI: Have you found community in any of your educational experience? Or a sense of support or belonging?

LL: Most of my educational experience is online-- so no, not really. I've had to build it myself over time.

SI: Yeah. Um. Can we maybe transition the conversations to another one of the topics you wanted to discuss.

LL: Yeah, sure. Yeah, I'm really all over the place here huh.

AH: I don't think so. I think it is really cohesive, you know it comes together

LL: It doesn't sound cohesive in my head but as long as you think so that's fine.

SI: No. Also there no framework for any other this. You are running the show.

LL: Oh man, that's dangerous. [Laughter]

SI: Do you want to talk about Judaism?

LL: Oh yeah, so, bit of a back story. It turns out that according to my mom, I did not find this out till very recently, my great grandfather was from a Jewish family and he married a Catholic woman and over time the heritage and the culture just kind of became lost in my family. But on the same token, a lot of the core principles were still there. So I wound up being raised with a sense of like: do your research; dont assume things; always make sure you look up what exactly is going on as extensively as possible-- question everything. Be accepting of your peers but on the same token don't take blatant bullshit and stand up for yourself as necessary. But also just don't stand idly when the blood of your neighbor is shed. So pursuit of social just and that sort of thing. And so later on down the road, you know how I mentioned that I was in that online debate guild and my focus was on religion and that sort of thing? Over time I had distanced myself from faith for a while. I was raised Christian but it didn't really click all that well for me. I wound up losing my faith a lot when I was younger because i could not understand if this god is all accepting and stuff, how could he allow other people to treat me poorly. And also the concept of hell made no sense to me whatsoever. Why am I being damned to hell for eternity for something I can't control. What the hell? So after a while, I just wound up rejecting that. More or less an atheist for many years. But I was still doing the research, going down to

the original text. Just trying to understand a bunch of stuff. I carried that throughout my life for many years afterwards. I want to say about four or five years ago, I started becoming very close friends with, who is my best friend, a Jewish woman down south. I started reading more about Jewish culture-- Judaism-- as a while so I could better support her and understand her experiences, and after a while I started to realize that there was something more to what was going on. I wasn't just researching it to better understand her. I had this drive to constantly learn more about this culture. There was something speaking to me and I could not pinpoint what it was exactly. And then I'm like, ok, so, this meshes a lot more with how I actually understand the world around me and so I made the decision of officially converting. I reached out to a local Synagogue and said I'm interested in this. That was after I had gone to a Passover service. I to experience what it was like before I made any decision. The environment there was so warm and accepting and people were so incredibly happy to be Jewish. There were like dancing in their chairs and singing and celebrating these centuries of freedom on Passover, right? And I was like this is home. This is where I want to be. I want to be happy in my skin. I want to be happy with the people around me and just loving life. So I decide after that, that I want to officially convert. Still haven't completely finished the process, but functionally speaking most people I come across just sort of assume that I am a full blown Jew. right? And I want to say that Judaism has in some ways really saved my life. Cause I'm able to like, do the background research and find different passages that speak to me but, on the same token, I don't necessarily feel some sort of dedication to speaking to the letter of the law. Everything is open to interpretation, and there is that constant openness to interpretation that is followed by pretty much everyone. Everyone is expected to be their own expert, and finding their own path on the same token. Kind of having that sense of community and stuff like that, right? And then after I tell my mom that I'm going to convert to Judaism she's like "oh yeah, your great grandfather was Jewish. And I am like, what? [Laughs] Funny how that works. Huh?

SI: So you went to the Passover feast?

LL: Seder

SI: Seder, sorry. And sort of thought, "yes"?

LL: Yes. This is exactly where I want to be. Yes.

SI: Since then have you partaken in other tradition or ritual with Jewish people?

LL: I try to go to services on as regular a basis as I can, given my own constantly up in the air schedule. A lot things have been changing for me in the past couple of years like finding my own path and work and that sort of thing and so I can't go as often as I would like but I'm working on it. In terms of like in the home, I have not implemented a lot of that just yet, but it is something I would like to start doing more.

SI: Are there [pause] is there [pause] ummmmm queer people, trans people, gender non conforming people in the Jewish community in central Maine that you have met?

LL: I've heard of them, have not exactly connected with them, so to speak. I'm just kind of chilling by myself mostly.

SI: Yeah.

LL: I did--this wasn't with my local community, but like I am a member of Portland Lesbian Coffee house. There were a few women on there that were having a Rosh Hashanah dinner over in September, so I hung out with them for a while. That was really cool. That was probably the closest thing I really got to Jewish LGBT relationships, so to speak. Other than my friend online, well, couple of friends online.

SI: Have you heard of, forgive me for the pronunciation of this: Am Chofshi? I have it somewhere in my notes.

LL: No.

AH: There was a long running Jewish LGBTQ social group in the area, in Maine, over the 90's. Have you ever heard of that?

LL: No

SI: Have you ever thought about what it would be like to have a social group of queer and trans people getting together for ritual?

LL: Aaaaah, I don't know. Um, so it's kind of complicated for the simple fact that like, a lot of trans people-- So Judaism in a lot of ways is a very gendered culture and religion. While there are additional sex categories, they are focused very much on biological sex and how that folds into fertility and the various mitzvot that have to be applied in each particular circumstance. So with each individual deviation, which mitzvot are applying to what particular categories. But in terms of the trans community, we kind of exist outside of those categories. Those categories are very very old and they are supposed to be kind of present at birth or some sort of point later on in life, but its doesn't really account for things like medical transition because there was no hormone replacement therapy in the 1300's, right. This sort of thing. So, I don't know. It might be interesting to see how other people apply it i guess, personally I haven't really felt that much of a drive to try to connect with those communities for the simple fact that I don't always feel comfortable in trans communities in general, so I just stick to doing my own thing when possible.

SI: Mhmm. That rosh hashanah thing sounded really nice though.

LL: It was an interesting dinner. In some ways it was kind of hard for me to enjoy it but you know, it was nice.

SI: Leslie Feinberg was on the list of topics you'd like to discuss. Do you just want to break into that?

LL: Mm so. Leslie Feinberg is kind of dear to my heart for the simple fact that like, it was her readings where I started to kind of find my way home in the past couple of years so to speak, right. That's where I started to see descriptions of my experiences that were kind of outside the framework that we've been kind of understanding the trans community now. So the thing about Leslie Feinberg is that she also walks between worlds, but it's also very fluid but without the non-binary focus that we're got going on. It is hard to explain. I have not read a whole lot of her books yet, for the simple fact that I'm still trying to track down a lot of different books and with how much work and school and all the other readings I've been doing-- there is only so much time in the day. I can start fifteen books at the same time and never finish them because I get through a couple paragraphs and go to another book, get a few pages and go to another book. I've lost count of how many books I'm reading at once and that's not even going into that I read scientific journals as a hobby. So I go through all of those articles, but one book that I very much been focusing on, or at least to a point, I actually had to stop reading after a while, Stone butch blues. On the one hand, it was really really nice to see. It was a fictional representation of what life was like. But on the same token, a lot of the different aspects of it was very much an example of my life, it felt like. I was seeing myself through a window there, not even a window-- it was almost like a mirror. After a while though, I had to stop reading it because it was triggering flashbacks. But yeah, being able to finally see an example of what I felt like was me, in literature, and it being older-- not necessarily what we've got going on in terms of publications now--- i don't really think i have words, how it made me feel. Everywhere.

SI: That was one of the first times when you were like, wow thats me? Are there other things that you read, or people, or communities that you are a part of , or places you frequent, things you do or---

LL: Right. So I started reading books like that, and experiences like that about last year. Yeah, Fall of last year. Maybe a little before that point. I wanted to learn more about other people's experiences instead of just focusing on my own, so I started branching out into the writings of butch women, and there were trans men who had experiences growing up butch. That sort of thing. I started reading up on experiences from de-transitioned women just because I wanted to learn where other people were coming from, instead of just making assumptions based on how I feel that they are. And I did not want my perception of other people to be filtered by other people's perceptions of them. I wanted to hear it right from them, and then I realized that what they were describing in terms of their own individual experiences-- like are we might have been using different words to describe our identities, but in essence, our experiences were very very similar. We might use different pronouns or call ourselves different label but in essence we were the same people. Then I started reading up in some of the resources they were providing each other, including Leslie Feinberg's books, and I'm just like coooool.

So, as a result, I wind up being a trans man and a butch woman at the same time, which confuses a lot of people, but to this little---these communities, these individuals, it actually makes a lot of sense. These are some of the only people that actually truly get that right

communities are spread out far and wide and they're still sort of in development. But on the same token, we could probably turn it into something bigger if people took the initiative to make a public effort.

SI: That almost sounds like a political movement.

LL: Almost. I don't know, I mean you could call it a political movement if you really wanted to but honestly i just see it as being decent human beings. We didn't get the community support that we were looking for when we were younger, so build it now. Support each other now, in the aftermath. If people want to call it political, fine. Personally I just think its caring about other people.

SI: Yeah. I was just thinking about Leslie Feinberg. She was a fierce activist--

LL: And on the same token, she is a hard act to follow if you think about it. Nobody can follow Leslie Feinberg. She was on her own level there. There's no really living up to that standard. [laughter]

SI: I think zie paved a way for us. To attempt to scaffold on.

LL: Yeah?

SI: Do you ever do work with youth? With the intentional peer support or in other aspects of your life?

LL: Professionally, right now? No. But thats just because I just started getting into this as an actual career so I'm working with adults for the time being. The impression is that I will start work with youth, including questioning youth, but it's a work in progress. One on one voluntarily, like there have been youth that came forward to me asking for support and I would provide it as best as I could but it hasn't been something that I've been directly focusing on until very recently.

SI: What about older folks?

LL: Across the lifespan. I've connected with older folks from the community, so to speak. And I feel like i have a lot to learn from those generations because they have certain experiences that also kind of resonate with me. And on the same token, there's this generational gap that been kind of going on where it feels like some of the younger generations don't want to associate with the older LGBT community but we stand to learn a lot from them. I would like to build more relationships with them if possible. Kinda difficult at times but you know, it's about making the effort right.

SI: What is one of the greatest obstacles that you see for the cross-generational relationships.

LL: [long pause] Taking a step back from the internal reactivity thing. Cause like, a few years ago I had this impression of what the older communities were like and like on some level I did not want to be associated with them, cause I was very much focused on the now, not the then. But on the same token, I had to start realizing that my reaction to that was more me wanting to distance myself from what I had gone through than anything that they were actually going through. And if anything, if i wanted to learn to be resilient in the face of all of that, why not ask the people that have survive decades of oppression and violence, right? Its hard though, cause I don't know, I worry about some of the younger folks in the community now because [pause] there is still a lot of that internal reactivity going on. And yeah, I don't know. I feel like we all need to focus a little less on taking it personally and a little more on how can we learn.

SI: Did you as a young person, and I'm sorry if this is redundant, but did you as a young person have any LGBTQ representation in you're live? Did you see somebody, did you have a friend in the family--

LL: No. I was the only one I knew. That ended up making it very very difficult from me for the simple fact that I had no idea just what exactly I was experiencing. So I knew that I had these kind of drives to be with women and stuff like that but I didn't know what it meant other than my peers just assuming, 'oh well you don't know how to perform femininity right and you don't know how to act up the roles to attract men in your life, so you must be a dyke etcetera.' and after a while I just kind of started to associate those concepts with pain and violence, so i disconnect myself from any sort of representation of that world, much to my own detriment. But I didn't have any sort of like LGBT adults to look up to, any sort of youth club or stuff like that. It was just me.

SI: Do you wonder what it would be like if you had?

LL: Yes and no. Umm, so there have been points where I wondered if i had more connection to lesbian communities and stuff like that, when i was younger if i would have gravitated toward the trans community later on in life or not. But after building those connections with those communities now, I realize there no simple answer to that. A lot of people had those connections when they were younger and they still wound up feeling more in tune with aspects of the trans community, aspects of the lesbian community, somewhere between the two worlds and you know, some folks eventually transition, some folks don't. Some people do some aspects of transition and call it good. All sort of fun stuff and then I'm like again, focusing on the what if's just-- stress. Why?

SI: heard. Good point. Do you see collective trauma as one of the forces that creates a wall to building community, or an obstacle to building community.

LL: Definitely.

SI: Do you want to talk about that a little?

LL: So, in some ways, I kind of feel like in terms of my personal life, part of the reason why I rejected aspects of those communities was because I had associated it with the trauma I had grown up with. I didn't want to be associated with these concepts that society was telling me were wrong. I didn't want to be associated with the term dyke or lesbian. Any of that stuff. .Because all that meant to me was getting my ass kicked. So I compartmentalized it as best as I could and ignored it to the best of my ability. And I get the sense that a lot of us are running into that problem. And it can take years of unpacking that, so to speak. Some folks do eventually unpack it. Some don't. Some of us it takes a while but we're getting around to it. For some of us it's a constant work in progress. It is all over the board. But, yeah, there is a definite relationship between the trauma a lot of us go through and how long it can take for us to finally work on building community with each other.

SI: Yeah. So it sounds like you did experience some, well you talked about LGBTQ interpersonal, interrelationship violence. It sounds like you also experienced some violence and bullying as a young kid for not conforming.

LL: Pretty much

SI: Do you want to talk about that?

LL: There are so many different directions that that conversation can go into that I am not even sure how to answer it.

SI: Fair. Ok. Are there other things about Judaism or Leslie Feinberg, or Sumner Maine that you'd like to talk about?

LL: Off the top of my head, I mean I can't really think of anything but I don't know how much of that is like it being morning and caffeine wearing off and all that fun stuff.

SI: Do You want to take a break and get some coffee and sit back down?

LL: Noo, ahhh dunno

SI: Ok cool. Have you ever heard of Outright?

LL: I've heard of it? Have not really connected with it, so to speak.

SI: Yeah, I have not either. I have some friends that are involved. From what I understand, it is a group of LGBTQ people, working with LGBTQ youth to provide resources, and community-- foster community. And I know there's one that's happening, there is an Outright in Lewiston-Auburn.

SI: So, I do have thoughts on some of that, but it's like on the one hand, I'm very very grateful that folks are putting in such an enormous effort to make sure that more youth grown up in a

supportive environment instead of having to deal with the kind of stuff I grew up with when I was younger, right. I want them to be able to have access to that sense of support and community. On the other hand, the problem with focusing on so much on that particular direction is that adults that have gone through that trauma already have very little support in the long run in order to deal with the after effects of that lack of support. We focus so much on trying to protect and support our youth that the adults that are still living with the aftermath have little to no support at all, unless their building it themselves. There's a huge gap in terms of resources available to folks like me, folks in older generations that we don't really know where to go. And so, sometimes the only support that we can really provide for each other is like in those one on one relationships that I'm building with folks that I'm working with on a regular basis. Sometime that the only support that we have, and it sucks. I wish that groups like outright existed when I was younger, but like sometimes I need support not too. You know? It's not just then. What about everything else it winds up folding into? Preventative is great, but we need triage, too. [laughter]

SI: [laughter] Yeah. In the field, now. For sure. I know I'm sort of harping on this idea of support and community and I think it might be because I have a bias belief that countering trauma and processing through it and learning from it and potentially healing, for me has been community centered. And I think that science would tell you a similar thing. I've got a bias but I keep harping on this idea of community because I think that's what you're doing.

Yeah. Part of the reason why is its focused on so much in science, is that it works. People are social animals. We need to be able to develop those senses of community. We have this kinship and internal tribes, so to speak. Like the whole sense of kinship and tribal identity, thats a huge aspect of Judaism too right? When people convert they are Jews. There is no question about it whatsoever, once you finish the process, you are a full fledged Jew just like everybody else. You don't question it or anything like that. They came up with their own definition of family and tribal affiliation. And so similar things wind up connecting to other groups as well, right? We've got our chosen family, we've got the people we learn to fold into our sense of wellness and recovery and just building our own support networks and we do that because we need it. We're not meant to be loan wolves. We need those connections with other people. And yeah, it can be hard to establish sometimes if we're all just kind of floating in our own directions and wondering like your standing alone on a mountain with your experiences and you're wondering how many other people are standing on their own little moutsinas. But if you yell loud enough, echoes can sometimes reach those other mountains. Ya know.

SI: Yeah. Good metaphor. So. Triage. We'd talked a little bit about ideal formation but what does triage look like?

LL: So let's see, kind of meeting people where they are at in terms of what they are currently struggling with, and how that impacts them now, hows that is going to impact them in the future, what their experiences look like in terms of how they have learned over time to deal with it. Like if a person used transition as a way of distancing themselves from their past, how can they understand that relationship to their experiences while still loving themselves in the process,

right. How can you support them through their understanding of their own experiences without judging them? Without giving your own preconceived notions of what they are experiencing. That sort of thing. And just like, awww man. [sighs] I don't know, how exactly do you define that really?

SI: I don't know. And we don't have to right now. Um, alright well, just peaking at these notes here. Is there, maybe we're hitting the time marker, where it might be like. Okay, do you want to talk about anything else in particular that we have not covered? And we can always schedule another time to get together. But are there things that we've talked about today that have created new thoughts or ideas for you? Things that you'd like to talk about in the last ten minutes?

LL: So I'm trying to think. One thing that I really hope that folks can work towards a little bit more is focusing a little less on boxes and more on people. Cause, I don't know. Over the years, in attempts to understand myself and understand other people, I just felt like all I really was trying to do was find my own little box that I fit in, but ultimately speaking, I feel like the boxes are kind of useless. Each box seems to be defined differently by each individual person and after a while, they are not very cohesive, you know? So yeah, I don't really know where I'm going with that, I think I'm just fed up with boxes in general.

SI: Yeah.

LL: Like screw the boxes, they are dumb. I'm tired of getting shoved in the boxes, whether that be from peers, or from whether that be from society, whether that's from heteronormativity or whatever. Even from the trans community. Sometimes they are constantly trying to shove me into all of these little boxes and I'm just like the boxes are dumb. Let's just focus on meeting people where they are at and coming to understand each other as individuals.

SI: Yeah. Wow. wow. Yeah. Absolutely. I think that's a probably a pretty good close to stop.

LL: Probably. I'm not sure how I can even follow up with that, SO.

SI:[Laughs] Well thank you so much for this interview. I'm going to turn this recorder off now.

LL: OK