

*Out/Closeted in the Quadrangles:
A History of LGBTQ Life at the University of Chicago*

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #27

CLIFFORD, ANTONIA (1988-) AB 2010 AM 2011

At U of C: 2006 - 2011

Interviewed: April 28, 2013

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Transcript by: Molly Liu

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Interview (April 28th, 2013) at the University of Chicago.

[00:00:00]

KG: Okay. You're now on the record. So, if you want to just start at the very beginning, we could talk about why you decided to come to [the University of Chicago]?

AC: I was from New Mexico, and at the time that I applied, I was not out in New Mexico. And like most kids in New Mexico, I was just trying to get out of the state. I feel like that's common in adolescence in a lot of places. So my main goal was to get out, my second goal was to get out to a city, and Chicago is a great option as a city, University of Chicago is a great option as a university. I think at that time they were pretty heavily marketing the Uncommon Application, the uncommon aspects of being a U of C student. And that probably caught me.

KG: And that was 2006, when you matriculated here? [AC: Yes.] Do people in your family normally go to college? Is that a family value for you guys?

AC: Yeah. Definitely. Education is a value. I'm the first person to complete a four-year degree in one swoop. And no one had attended something like the University of Chicago before. Like the fact that it was academically ranked where it was was a big deal.

KG: Was the academic ranking part of your choice, or was it the uncommon aspect of it?

AC: Both were important. I felt I was a smart kid at my high school, but I was also a weird kid at my high school, and those were both important identities.

KG: When you got here, did you feel like your expectations about the school were met?

AC: Yeah, I had a pretty weird house, for sure.

KG: Where were you?

AC: I was in Tufts House, in Pierce Tower. Which is—Pierce was an experience, always. But I also ended up being roomed with a queer person, which was interesting, and part of a house that was weird but also—people who I could get along with.

KG: How long did you stay in housing?

AC: Just that first year, because I traveled abroad my second year, so I moved off campus.

KG: Okay. Your first year, did you find most of your social group through housing?

AC: I would say probably 50-50 through—no, 1/3rd through housing, 1/3rd through classes, and 1/3rd through being queer.

KG: Oh okay, so you got into that—5710 didn't exist when you started, right, but there was—?

AC: It was Amandla, the Amandla Center when I started, but that wasn't the queer... When I was there, Q&A was still meeting in a basement on some couches. A basement in Reynolds. And not even an office, we didn't even have, it wasn't a room, it was couches in the middle of a hallway. I got to know—I feel weird because I got to know people who were doing different things. I knew Bill Michel, and I knew Kathy Forde, they were running a Q mentoring group then, but it wasn't located anywhere, it didn't have anything like that. I got to know Rosa Ortiz, that was later, when she was working for 5710. But people in a bunch of different areas in the university that had this kind of connection that was outside of everything, CGS, the Center for Gender Studies, I thought that was also important in that. But it all felt very disconnected.

KG: Yeah. Were you a gender studies major?

AC: Nnn-mmm. I was Sociology and a Latin American Studies minor. But I actually did a five-year program, so I stuck around and ended up finishing up at the School for Social Service Administration.

KG: Oh, okay, so did you take classes at CSGS and—I guess CGS is what you called it.

AC: Yeah, sorry. [KG: No, it may have been called that.] I mean, I took a few classes, certainly. I took some that were cross-listed actually in Latin American Studies, which I found interesting, actually. I didn't take a lot of classically queer classes. That was like everything I did outside of class.

KG: Sorry, I'm just trying to construct your social life in my head. It sounds very disparate.

AC: I'd say there were years—it was very different across the years. First year I was definitely more centered in my house, but first year—I think a lot of how I organized my social life is thinking about both seasons and things that we did that year.

So first year, I got involved with Q&A early. We did dodge ball, called Q-Force, we were terrible, we did not win a single game. Which is actually a theme—that we never win anything. So Q-Force was terrible, we didn't win. And then Genderfuck came in the spring. It wasn't part of anything, it was just something that we did in the spring. And there were events throughout. But Q&A didn't do a lot that year besides try to galvanize people as a social support.

And QWORUM, which was the queer women's discussion group, was incredible. That was my first exposure to—I mean, I knew queer women in New Mexico, not a lot, but that was my first exposure to queer women my age, and a little older, and living their lives and being super attractive. Everything! I was totally out of my depth, nervous all the time about things. That introduced me to queer women's poker night, which was a loosely organized thing where a bunch of basically older lesbians got together and played—I mean, they were older to me, they were grad students—played poker and, like, the first time I went—I'm a first year, right. I'm, like, super nervous, super geeky, I go solo, and they're like, “Oh! Hi! Glad you made it!” And I'm like, “Me too??” Like, super nervous. They said, “Oh, we're out of chairs, we'll just pull up a bench and you can straddle that, I'm sure you're used to it!” And I turned bright red and like lost it. Because I could not handle the social environment. But that was amazing. And I think really shaped a lot of what me and my peers did, down the road. Traditions that we wanted to keep going. And the traditions were not the kind of—the set traditions, like—I don't even know. Day of Silence, or Pride—those things weren't as important, but the idea of social groups. Like, queer poker is something we played, kept going for a long time. Queer broomball—no, not queer broomball, sorry. Dykes on Ice. There was a lot of problems about how non-inclusive that was. And yeah, things like that, I think.

KG: How did you sort of get involved in this scene?

AC: Well, the poker came through QWORUM. There was a lot of social aspects to QWORUM that I think are really interesting and why you have interest in these groups like that. Like why you have these support groups—they're not just for people who are like, “God, I can't handle my identities and I've never come out to anyone before!!” Not just that stage in the process, which everyone goes through and everyone should have support, but also the—meeting people is different for queer folks, and also—social space is different. Some people might come from a place where they have a lot of queer friends, and some people come from a place where it is unheard of for people to be not homophobic. To have not internalized their own homophobia. Not that we didn't have problems, we certainly had huge monster problems, including a lot of sexism and some weird stuff. But I did come from a place that had women affirming their own sexuality in that way.

KG: So QWORUM did that through the space to have discussion, and also the social aspects of it?

AC: Yeah, we talked about some serious shit. Like, things that like—you had to remind

yourself—it felt very U of C. Because you were doing this on your free time, coming to a classroom, to sit down with other folks your age and talk about serious problems. I think in later years it got a little less serious, where we got—there was one year where we spent a significant amount of time discussing this one girl's problem being in love with a straight woman on her soccer team, and that was less—that was less transformative. But I think the other times we were talking about, like, why tattoos and queer women go together. Or what is butch in comparison to femme, and do we see it on our campus.

A few years later I became, I think it was 2009 or 2010, I became the leader of QWORUM, which had its highs and lows, because there were some social drama—I don't think it's necessarily the best thing for the leader of Q&A become the leader of QWORUM. Socially that's not necessarily a great thing. But again, we tried to have serious conversations about what people were going through. With a queer lens, and a lesbian lens as well.

KG: How is Q&A in comparison to that?

[00:11:00]

AC: I think Q&A changed a lot when I was there. I came in a very low period in terms of membership numbers, in terms of—it was like, the board didn't love each other a lot. There were divisions. We'll just say that. Natural divisions. So my first year was full of that situation. But also coming from—I had just come out of being trained in queer organizing in New Mexico through GLSEN and some other groups, so I came to U of C and was like, “Wow, this is potential. There is so much here.” I was friends with queers across the spectrum, and most of them weren't involved in Q&A, and I couldn't understand why you wouldn't be involved in Q&A, that just seemed like a natural thing to me.

My second year, I went abroad and came back winter quarter, and took over as social chair from the grande dame Daniel Shannon, who is a wonderful beautiful person in his ability to carry the emotional stories and weights of what it is to be gay and queer in our modern life. I learned a lot from him. But I came back to be social chair, which was—means nothing. So came back, and immediately was like, “So we have an insane budget”—for some reason we always had an insanely large budget, I don't know how that happened.

KG: Someone in SG loved you.

AC: Yeah! Really, really loved us because they kept on giving us money for the following four years. So it was like, let's do this, and we made pride week happen. That was the first pride week, that year. We made—of all tragedies, that was the year that four trans and genderqueer women of color were killed within the first four weeks of the year. Someone just offhandedly in QWORUM—this is an example of how things overlap and don't overlap, people in QWORUM who don't care and didn't go to Q&A were like, “Have you heard about this? This is insane, this is upsetting, we need to do something.” And I said,

“Well, we can do something, we have loads of money or whatever it is.” So we did a combination—we put together a flier that had information about these people and what happened. Also talking about how trans women of color's lives are so unvalued in our society, and they face these high rates of violence, and that's not talked about. It was kind of an advocacy piece and directing people towards this vigil and moment of silence and creative space that we put together in 5710, which was by that point open.

Yeah. Second year. Second year I also came back and I started working in 5710. So again, intersectionally, me working at 5710, and me being on the board of Q&A, meant that we could have space for Q&A in 5710. The fact that 5710 was open at that point meant that we had staff that we could talk to, and we knew who they were, and they weren't spread out. We could be collaborating with other groups in a different way. So I think that really helped grow the impact over the next three years, probably, of Q&A.

KG: Okay, so you got sort of a program of doing stuff together your second year as far as Q&A goes.

AC: Yeah, and had a great team of people involved at that point. It was [redacted], Iah Pillsbury [Interview #51], and [redacted], working on Q&A. Through the next year, it was [redacted]—and many other wonderful people. Also during the winter is Dykes on Ice, which was broomball, which people had started long before me. I'm forgetting the name of the person who did this, but they are awesome...

So we continued that for the next couple of years. We made t-shirts. It was super fun. Like I said, it was social, but it felt slightly more than that. Every year we would get called “faggots on the ice,” we'd get ridiculous verbal—[KG: Seriously?] Yeah. Admittedly we had—we had some of my straight guy friends on the team and they would definitely contribute. They'd say, “Oh, if I'm a faggot, then you're a bigger faggot,” and you're like, no, okay, that's not helping.

The first year I addressed it with their—what do they call it? Intramural whatever? I don't even think they call it intramural—it's just sad, little, discarded teams—sport guy, and he had a talk with the refs because after that they got a little better about calling us out. But we did, we got that every once in a while.

And when I was there, I remember a trans student who wanted to play males' soccer—a trans man student wanted to play males' soccer, and the team wanted him to play, he was kickass, they wanted him on the team. But the intramural team was like “whoa whoa whoa.” Some shit—that somebody decided it was a problem. After that incident, they tried to put some things in place that would make it safe, or god forbid okay, for trans people to play intramural soccer. Which, you know, college is a funny thing because it makes you feel like all these things matter, and they do matter, but you get out into the world and you're like, “How much did they matter?” But it did matter! It did matter for trans students that they could play in the intramural teams that they should play on.

And open housing also went through during those four years. And so 5710, open housing,

all these trans issues started being discussed on a more campus level. The Maroon got called out for homophobia, the UC Dems got called out for homophobia. I mean, there was a lot—I feel like there was so much change in those four years, where it just felt like so much was happening in a really positive way.

KG: Okay. Can we go back to a couple of the things that you just said? Because I don't think we've had anyone who's mentioned that stuff yet.

AC: Oh no. I'm bad at specifics.

KG: It's okay. Whatever you can remember is fine, and if you can't then it's okay too.

AC: Well, there was a Mister University pageant the year before I got there, where there were a lot of calls of “faggot!” at a certain contestant, and I know the Greek system had to sit down and discuss some of that.

KG: I do think we have documents on that.

AC: Good. There was—well, so maybe my favorite thing that we did was—so the UC Dems and the UC Republicans had a debate. They had several debates. One they decided to do gay marriage. And oh, okay, fine, great, it's not a big deal for most of you, but let's do that. But how they advertised it was they put up a picture from *The Simpsons*, and they said, “Oh, this time it's social. We're debating gay marriage.” So from the start it felt kind of dismissive. And we—a couple of us went and we sat through the debate. Which was terrible. It was pretty U of C in the sense that the Democrats were like, oh, this is funny, we run the show, and the Republicans were actually libertarians, talking about why don't we do civil marriage for everyone, civil unions for everyone. And the Democrats were saying things like, “We should get behind gay marriage because we all know that gay guys could use that influence of monogamy on their relationships, and we all know that the lesbians are fully monogamous anyway,” and just a lot of dismissive comments, I found homophobic comments. And in approaching the board, whoever was on the board at that time, we received a lot of feedback, like, “Guys, it was funny, it's not a problem, what do you mean we're homophobic, we're Democrats, there's no issue here.” We said, “That's fine.”

And then we wrote a satirical great straight marriage debate, which we performed as kind of a satirical response. We invited them. They declined our invitation verbally. And it was it like two teams—I'm not going to remember them. It was two fake organizational teams that were based on the left and right sides of the gay marriage debate. It was this huge debate on whether or not straight people should be allowed to marry based on how destructive heterosexual unions are for our countries, about the immorality of *The Bachelor* and shows like that that were undermining our values. It was over the top and satirical and ridiculous, with some gay humor thrown in, and I thought it was great. We had over 100 people come. It was really short but really sweet and felt like the right response at the time.

We also had the Westboro Baptist Church come. God. I'm sure—

KG: I think we have a bunch of pictures of that, actually.

[00:21:47]

AC: Yeah. We tried to organize—

KG: Was that Q&A, that was trying to organize?

AC: Well, it started off...Hunter, last name unremembered, heard about it and had a very strong reaction and wanted to organize people, started organizing a ton of people, a lot of people got involved, a lot of organizations got involved, including at that point the UC Republicans and Democrats expressed interest in getting involved in some kind of counter response. The problem with the WB... the WBC? Yeah. Is that response is what they want, right? And so, we—the adults, not adults, but staff on campus we sought out for guidance were all saying, “Look, we're all saying the University line, which is 'don't engage with them, don't interact,' because they will come back if they get a rise out of you, and if they get—and also they make money by suing people, so don't interact.” Meanwhile the student body is getting to this fever pitch of wanting to confront, and there's this hipster intellectualism part there where people are like, “Well, we want to engage in an ironic way, and I want to get my picture of 'God Hates Cephalopods' or whatever to get on a Facebook photo next to 'God Hates Fags' and that's funny to me, and that's ironic, and so”—whatever.

There was a positive celebration inside the quads, and a lot of leafleting and attempting to educate, attempting to communicate with folks kind of on the front line of what became this huge pack of people following them with their “God Hates Obama” signs. But as they were walking away—as they were walking towards the quad, or towards the Midway, they said, “We're coming back next year” and stuff. It was a very hateful day, in a lot of ways. I mean, I felt like it was not a united day. They went to Dominican University after us. Like a few days later, and that response was a very united student front. I think them coming to us brought out more of the divisions at the U of C. People who think oppression is real and people who find it—who find the most important response to be humor vs. people who find the most important response to be support. There were a lot of things going on that day.

KG: Yeah. What did the Dominican University do in contrast to the U of C?

AC: It's a little different in that they have this huge field that blocks them off. So WBC was way over there. But a bunch of students got together and made these huge wings, like the wings that people used to separate WBC from Matthew Shepherd's funeral back in the day. And set up a peace program letter. The school actually engaged with them to create a day of speaking about things, specifically on that issue. Versus the university's response was “don't engage, don't talk to them, it's not worth it, they're crazy, and we can't get involved.” So staff were there as dean on call, but staff and faculty and the administration

took a very hands-off approach. Which I find almost damaging in the light of—in the light of what that does is, “well, there are two valid points to this issue and we're not going to get involved because it's too controversial.” It's like, no, some of your students are being verbally assaulted today. Some of your students were verbally assaulted, and called sinners and all these—“you're rotting in hell, you're rotting in hell,” is what they kept repeating to one of our students, and the fact that the university was like, “Well, it was your choice to interact with them, and we told you not to, and we're not going to send out an email afterwards either.”

We also had HOME come by a couple of times, which is a cute little Oak Park group. It's like Homosexual...research against homosexuality, so about how all homosexuals are pedophiles, and like, they came by on campus several times to drop off fliers. Elderly white gentlemen, passing out fliers.

KG: Oh...I have seen these people.

AC: Yeah. And on several occasions we had to set up impromptu protests, and people would just make little barriers, or pull up signs out of thin air, those kinds of things. There were a lot of those spontaneous responses to those types of issues. But I felt like the student response was very fractured. And the administration response was very hands-off on some issues. Yeah. The *Maroon* was constantly my—whatever. Whatever. They did a lot of articles and promotional stuff and a lot of that.

KG: Anyway, go on about the *Maroon*...

AC: There was just like an exchange—their editorial board was definitely going through some transition, and one of their editorials would cry about pride week not having enough salaciousness and sexiness, that it was too lecture-focused, and then I would write a response. And then the next editorial would complain about why we were celebrating pride. Like pride is one of the seven deadly sins. And then it would quote from the first article, that was saying the opposite. And just, kind of, felt like—it is what it is, it's student journalists in training, and some of them are very bad at it. But part of it was, it's amazing how much we don't understand or give credit to a group. I don't know. Like these were—this was the same year or two that the Men In Power group came up in the University of Chicago.

KG: I don't think I know about this.

AC: Really? This is—whatever! It was two to three years of feeling like being a woman on the University of Chicago really fucking sucked. Because people—the same guy who wrote that same article about pride wrote another article about how springtime brings out the slutty women at the University of Chicago because we wore shorts. It's, like, shocking that we wore shorts and that's distracting to him. As a gay man, in class. And Men In Power was, in short, a certain white male student's attempt to get on CNN. Which he did. Congratulations to him. Launched his career into the conservative blogosphere, by creating a group called Men In Power, which was about how men are disenfranchised in

society and how we should have a group that promotes their interests. Because men are—ugh, Christ.

KG: Was this an RSO?

AC: This was an RSO, an officially sanctioned RSO, that was eventually forced to change its name, but only after a year of pressure by students, and the administration being like, “Look, we hate it, but we can't do anything about it” until there was kind of this bigger backlash. For me it mirrors a lot of what is going on right now with this Politically Incorrect UChicagoans shit—sorry, I don't know if you can keep the cuss words in here.

[Transcriber's note: Politically Incorrect UChicago Confessions was a Facebook page begun in April 2013 which allowed people to anonymously submit “confessions,” many of which were racist and sexist.]

KG: I'm sure it's fine.

AC: Keep going?

KG: Don't censor yourself.

AC: We're cyclically—there are these eruptions of what is kind of like a conservative backlash to the attempt of minority groups to express rights, to express themselves, and somehow the conservative groups feeling like, or the groups in power, whatever you want to call it, offended or pushed back because suddenly their rights have been violated. Right? Because privilege is a dialogue.

My year was also when a student was arrested in the Reg. A student was arrested in the Reg for trespassing, because he was a black male student, and that happened several times—not at the library, but that same situation happened four times in four years. And the university treated each as if it were a separate incident. I feel like that continues, it's like a continuation. I know over the Politically Incorrect UChicagoans thing, the meeting in OMSA [Office of Minority Student Affairs], which—thank god for OMSA. Somebody said, there was a quote that someone put out there, “I've been in the same damn room talking with the same damn people over a similar issue a few years back, and it doesn't make sense that I'm here again to talk about the same shit. Somebody making me feel not welcome, like this isn't a place for me. Same shit. Two years, three years, separate.”

And I feel that unfortunately—that echoes with my experience. That we have these huge bursts of spontaneous whatever, and some beautiful things happen and we had these beautiful events, and then there would be these eruptions where it just felt like this is a divided student body, and this is a student body and an administration that refuses to have broad conversations. For god's sakes, WBC came to our campus, and you don't want to ask students to have a conversation about that? About how that made them feel, and what that group is about? You don't think that could be valuable for students, and healing for students? So those were some of the conversations that we had, the difficult

conversations that came up, towards the end.

KG: Were you involved in open housing at all, or was that more of an administrative thing?

[00:32:13]

AC: That was more administrative. I was living off-campus, definitely. But—and it wasn't, it wasn't something they really asked for Q&A's help with. Except that Q&A helped to recruit some people to talk to about it, some people who were interested and had concerns to be expressed. I know someone who wrote their BA on it, if you need to...

KG: Oh, really? The library might have that. I'll look into that.

AC: I can give you a name.

KG: That's great too. Do you want to talk about academics at all at the U of C?

AC: Uh.

KG: No?

AC: Mm. I don't know that I have a lot to say.

KG: Okay. How did you end up in Sociology?

AC: Sociology allowed me to talk about context and...so a lot of my interest is—obviously, since I went into social work—is—I guess not obviously. Is around suicide and mental health and other issues like that. Sociology allowed me to do an in-depth look at self-harm and suicidality from a community perspective and not an individualist perspective. And I liked Latin American Studies because they let me read about revolution and people organizing, and that was really the discipline that allowed me to do that.

KG: Did you go abroad to a country that had to do with Latin American studies?

AC: Yeah. Well, no. I went to Spain. I went to Toledo on a language study abroad.

KG: Was that a UChicago program?

AC: It was connected. It was with the José Ortega y Gasset Foundation.

KG: Did you have any professors, or did you know of any professors who were very active in LGBT life? I know you have a picture of Bert Cohler...

AC: Yeah. I actually never had him in class, which is a true tragedy and one of the things that a gay student at U of C would be like, “Oh, you have to, you have to take a class with him.” I was never able to. Rest in peace. Many wonderful things about him.

I was very lucky in terms of professors. But my BA advisor was Kristen Schilt, who's there now and does work around many different things, including women in academia, but also including trans men and sexuality studies and gender studies. That—she helped bring a lot of what I did in my personal life, a little more into dialogue with my academic life. I think the two were pretty disjointed in the sense that I just did my schoolwork and then I did what I did on the outside. I fought the same battles in that I had the same types of arguments that I had in class that I was having outside of class, in terms of people being oppressive pieces of shit, I don't know. But she brought, I don't know, more theory to bear on that question. Which is why I think I like Sociology, because it gives you more theory to use through your life.

KG: Did she do that through conversation or like leading you on your BA, or classes that you took with her?

AC: Probably mostly conversation. We brought her to lunch conversations with Q&A, and my personal conversations with her made some things more clear and connected. Her classes were also just phenomenal.

KG: I can't think of what she teaches off the top of my head, but I'm sure the course catalog...

AC: Yeah, I took one of the courses she taught in Gender and Sexuality Studies. She did a deviant behavior course, which was probably—yeah. And I took one of her graduate courses in study of sexuality or something, which was very helpful. Trying to think who else. Gay-wise there wasn't a ton. There was some interesting—Mary Lee Behnke was an amazing teacher. She left to go teach at Exeter—she's on the East Coast now. She's was an amazing Hum professor, and actually two or three years after I had her for Hum, my girlfriend at the time had her, and it was kind of a—I don't know. I had been one of her favorite students my year, and my girlfriend was one of her favorite students her year, and there was an interesting moment where we revealed to her that we were together, and that both of us were kind of nervous about it—we didn't think she would react poorly, but it was just one of those weird reaction moments, just negotiating a space. And she was fine. We've talked to her several times since.

KG: Do you keep in touch with her?

AC: Yeah.

KG: That's nice. Let's see, your next section is about your sexual identity. You mention that you weren't really out at home, but then you came out right away, it seems like?

AC: Yeah. I...I mean, by the time I—by the time I got here, I was out at home. But things, relationships were developing, and reforming. Also during that time...yeah. And so I came in and I had a girlfriend, and then they actually transitioned to male (FTM), so had a boyfriend back home. Yeah. That was an interesting kind of personal identity development issue around what I like. People.

KG: How do you—if you want to answer this, how did you end up identifying as “dyke”? That’s what I have written on your demographic form, I guess.

[00:39:15]

AC: Yeah. When people actually ask me how I identify, I tend to say that I love women. You know? I love—I don’t know. I think I’m very woman-centric but not an earthy way, just a for real, the people that I’ve found most interesting and have been most drawn to are women. That doesn’t mean feminine, but things like people who identify feminine in themselves. Yeah. And embrace that.

I like “dyke” because I can’t help but smile every time I say it. To me, “dyke” is a community word. “Lesbian” sounds more individualist. It sounds scientific, it sounds cold. I think a lot of people complain that way about “lesbian.” “Queer” is a community word to me, I think more people use “queer” so it’s a bigger community now. “Queer” embodies a lot about me, but I think “dyke” is a fun word. Sexuality is fun, my sexuality is fun, I think sex is fun, so “dyke” for me is just a good little word to capture that. Nobody likes that I use that word. Nobody. My girlfriend doesn’t like that word, while I was at U of C, half the people I liked said, why would you use that word to describe—because Dykes on Ice, that makes me not want to join. And they would say, “I have experienced—people have used that word against me,” and I would say, “People have used that word against me too. That hurt, and I understand and value its hurtful power. And I understand it may not feel the way it does for me, having gotten to a different place with it, and being in a place where I really do enjoy the history of it.” For others I think that’s fine. I don’t call other people dykes, you know? I call myself a dyke.

KG: Do you feel like you’re participating in a reclamation of the word? How does that work for you?

AC: I think with “queer”—“queer” has gotten to the point where I can be like positive, affirming, reclamation. I understand it’s been used negatively in so many negative contexts and continues to be, but I think “queer” is a positive reclamation. I don’t think “dyke” for me is about reclamation in the same sense. I think it’s a little bit—not so much about the word as about a summation of me, but more the word like as an emotion. For me that is a positive emotion, but I understand that it is not that for many.

KG: Did you have to come out at the U of C? You mention that you had to come out to your professor.

AC: Yeah. That was always—I feel like coming out to your professor was always a certain step in the relationship-building process with your professor. I did it for very few. A select few. I was immediately out. I got to college and was like, “This is the life I want. It’s going to be the following things, I am going to continue to go to classes, but I am going to do the classes that I want, I am going to fight to get into the classes that I want and the professors I want. I am going to create friends that I want, and I am going to make time

for those friends. That is more important than anything. I am going to live my life out, and with the people I want to live it with, and I am not going to worry about it. Because I am privileged to be in a certain position where I can feel safe and respected, but—yeah.” I feel like I came in being like, “college is that time of my life where I get to be me.” You know. So I think from the jump, I was out, I was active, I was—yeah. Yeah. Definitely. And having a roommate who was queer, who was much less social than me, much less out there, was kind of part of that. Yeah.

KG: And you mentioned that your house was super friendly about this sort of stuff?

AC: Yeah. I think I came out in the first week in the—we were sitting in the large hall room, and I was talking about this teacher of mine who—in high school, I was one of his favorite students, but he was very anti-gay and he would say things like “our whole softball team is dykes,” and “no one in my calc class could possibly think they were gay, because you'd be stupid to think you were gay, and you couldn't be in calc if you were stupid,” whatever. Some stupid joke. And so the last day of class, I turned in my exam, had him grade it, and gave him a newspaper article that outed me, basically. And told him to read it, and that I hoped that he appreciated it, then I walked out and never saw him again. I was telling this story, and someone interrupted and was like, “Whoa, wait. Are you gay?” I said, “Yeah! But my 'I'm gay' shirt is in the wash, I'm sorry, I was going to wear it this week.” I felt like that's all I needed to do. And that's pretty much it, for my house. I had to continually come out until about third year, it was like, before you met me you knew.

KG: Your name preceded you.

AC: I think probably something like that. It's a fairly small campus.

KG: And it gets smaller all the time. Let's see. The next question is, “do you have other LGBTQ friends at UChicago,” which seems silly, since we've discussed Q&A and QWORUM already.

AC: Yeah. I will say that I have straight friends at the U of C.

KG: Let the record show! Let's see. Do you want to talk about dating at all? Some people do, and some people don't really.

AC: I mean, I guess I can—I don't know. I want to talk about other people's dating. In that my dating has never been very difficult. Not in a braggy way, but in that I feel like my life is pretty straightforward. I feel like there was—there was a lot of in-group issues. For a campus that—you know, people don't get out very much. Out of Hyde Park, out of wherever. So then a lot of Q&A events became—they were dating parties, or people would kind of—you know? There was a little bit of pressure to be like matchmaker, and I felt like that was kind of funny because I'm very bad at those sorts of things. I was not at all interested in facilitating that for other people. But I feel like that's like a valid and okay thing to be. To be part of an event. It's real. It's a community of people with similar

interests, and they can date. What else was I thinking about that? Dating... I can't remember. It's okay. Oh—never mind.

KG: Did you do anything with the Hyde Park community as opposed to the UC community?

AC: Yeah. I mean, more than the Hyde Park community, the Chicago community. I was—especially in the last two years, I was working 20 hours a week outside, once on the Southwest side and once in Bronzeville. And was pretty involved. Back in the day, probably in my first or second year, I went up to Broadway Youth Center and helped them paint their second space, and I just held onto that as, oh, now they're moving from that space. That's another area, and I volunteered with them in several different capacities over several years while I was at the U of C. And now they're moving onto another space, so there's something there too about history and transition. And obviously they're amazing. And all of that.

I think Hyde Park is an interesting neighborhood. I may move back there in six months or whenever that is. It's an interesting neighborhood. I think it has interesting history. Whether or not it's a rumor or not. But one of the parks—the parks over on 53rd allegedly used to be a gay hookup spot, with bathrooms where people used to hook up. The Falcon Inn, which is like a little pub thing bar on 53rd, we had heard, me and my friend, my first year—so okay, we're 18—we had heard that this used to be a gay hookup spot as well, so we went. We were 18, girls, and they served us because we're girls or whatever it is. It was a Monday night. I don't know! That's how me and this woman started dating, actually, that we went to this bar with each other, looking to find some kind of gay Hyde Park hideout or something. But that was really sweet. I don't know. Just these ideas of hidden histories in places. Which definitely exists.

KG: Yeah. You'll never believe how many people tell me, this is the gay hookup spot, and no one will confirm it.

AC: Yeah, no confirmatory evidence whatsoever! I will confirm—

KG: The Wooded Island, the Cove, the fourth floor of the Reg, a bathroom, everything. Everybody has a story.

AC: Ahh! I'm imagining a map of Hyde Park with all these little spots that's like “once hooked up here,” you know? Yeah. Well, it worked for me.

KG: Yeah. That's what matters. It sounds like the stuff that you did in other communities was less gay-focused and more community-focused?

[00:50:04]

AC: Yeah. I would say that it was work-focused in the sense of—yeah. I worked with BYC, which is kind of LGBT explicitly focused. I did some things in other neighborhoods with other LGBT organizations. But not explicitly LGBT.

Now I'm a professional gay. Now I work for an LGBT organization, or research group. But that hasn't—that hasn't really been my pattern.

KG: “Professional gay” sounds like a wonderful title.

AC: It's a great job.

KG: So we've talked a little bit about—well, we've talked extensively about your activism on campus. Is there anything else that you want to add to what we've already discussed on that?

AC: I guess the main thing to add is that 5710 is my home. It opened, and I was one of those first student workers, and I had been involved in some of the conversations about the run-up. I was not one of the student organizers who really brought that to happen, but I thought that was such a beautiful story. Like, LGBTQ students and students of color and LGBTQ students of color forcing this issue and wanting this to be a joint space and wanting to make that work, and the reality of making that work was so beautiful. And painful. And I think the staff there do amazing things every day. I think the students who use the space are amazing, and do amazing things with it. Working there and organizing things there was a privilege. I just really don't think there's another place like that.

And it forced us—I think force is a little strong, but it encouraged us to be having difficult conversations. Like the fact that Q&A is a majority-white organization. I don't know about currently, but during my tenure. Majority-white in a campus that is a large percentage white, within a larger neighborhood and community context that is not. In a larger city that is not, and within a country that is in—certain people would believe founded on ideas of white supremacy. So we were trying to have some conversations about that and doing intersectional work, doing baby steps of intersectional work, that only now I'm actually doing intersectional work, or actually really understanding solidarity. But I think those pieces were so important in my own personal development, and maybe in the community organization's development. I don't know. I don't think there's a lot of longevity to anything there. But yeah. The ability to do that intersectional work and to have staff to back me up, to back all of us up, was important. I don't want to say that we did amazing things, because I think that intersection with people of color and people of color issues is still rough. In the world. And still on campus, from what I hear.

KG: Do you have any examples of the steps that you were taking at 5710 towards intersectionality?

AC: Yeah. So every year we did pride—we did pride week every year from my second year. We made sure—so every event we did was cosponsored with another group. And specifically that the keynote was either a person of color or cosponsored with one of the quote-unquote “minority” student groups. That was intentional. But it wasn't blasted all over our work. It wasn't like “Q&A presents diversity week with like”—it wasn't made explicit, but it was an organizing principle in our work. We also had, once every year,

probably, we had the discussion about queerness and race. Those were difficult discussions and not necessarily very helpful. In that the majority of the room was white, having these conversations, and it was difficult to engage how to have that conversation in a positive way that wasn't going to create harm. Those were still difficult, but we did have them every year for a reason. Because those issues are difficult, because they don't go away. I think there are—we tried to do a lot of outreach to different groups, both on an individual level, and on kind of a support-their-event kind of level. Especially with the minority, the quote-unquote “minority” student groups. There was that. Because I think that was important. It wasn't as important to me that we seem in solidarity with the green student groups. You know? But that we understood as a group why the other groups in 5710, the other groups with ties, were more important. Yeah.

KG: Were there any other big political or social issues happening on UChicago while you were there?

AC: I guess...well, like, Prop 8 happened. Which was an exciting time to be in Chicago, period. The march that happened in response to Prop 8 was huge and beautiful in its own way. We did speak with—we had Greg Harris a couple of times to engage him on civil unions in Illinois, and that has now passed, so that was an interesting moment to be involved. To try to connect some University of Chicago students to a larger issue, which is not always the easiest thing to do. I think broadly, more like social trends speaking, we...that period was one—I don't know. Like I was saying, the Genderfuck photos from 2001 show a very kind of binary sexuality where men wore dresses and women wore suits and ties, and my period at U of C was so genderqueer.

Genderqueer as a word emerged during that time. We had folks whose day-to-day presentation was very fluid. And that was an open conversation, and that there was pushback and that there were fights about those kinds of things. Fluidity was very present, and not in a binary way but in an in-between kind of way. Yeah. And we had, I think we had folks from anarchists to conservative folks on campus and queer and out at the same time. And hating each other, but in dialogue around different issues, engaged at different times. Which is exciting.

KG: So, as some sort of overarching question about U of C, do you think that your experiences there were typical of students?

AC: Mm. I mean...like, yes and no. I feel like I had a broad overview of what was going on at the university at any given time. But I think my experience was... You know, everybody does a lot at the U of C. People choose to do a lot in different avenues. And I felt very lucky because I felt like I got to know people who were choosing to do different things with their time in their four years there. So I got a sense of the different experiences people had. In terms of doing a lot and feeling like you were doing a lot, but meeting a bunch of people, a bunch of people who you liked, and thinking about your future, and feeling conflicted about all of it—yes. That part definitely.

KG: Yeah. Did your perception of the college change over the four or five years that you were

there?

AC: Yeah. I was also there—I forgot—I was also there in the period that they switched to the Common App, and some of the quote-unquote “student activism” around that. I was not part of that. But that transition to a more—a very open dialogue about how we wanted to be an elite institution kind of made me see the place in a different light. I'm...I don't know. I still feel very lucky, privileged, and it was a very positive experience over five years to have been able to be at the University of Chicago and take away what I have, and build what I have. But. There are a lot of things institutionally that are uncomfortable, and I think some of the critical thinking skills that the U of C so espouses and so strives to teach in its students bring you naturally to a critique to the institution and how it functions and how it says it wants to function. Yeah.

KG: And this stuff is sort of coming up while you were there? Or is that more of your perception now?

AC: I would say that was definitely clear to me while I was there. So at the end of my third year is when I applied for this—I did Summer Links at the end of my third year, and then I enrolled in the School of Social Administration, basically cutting off my fourth year. In part that was so attractive because being part of the undergraduate institution felt kind of violent at that point. And also the U of C with a graduate degree, or whatever. It's all the same institution, but it was an institution with the classes—it was even more hypocritical, but at least you were talking about it. And those classes were designed that you were talking about it. You were talking about poverty, you were talking about why we were in Hyde Park and what the surrounding neighborhoods are like and why. And there was a little less hypocrisy in that. But definitely while I was at the U of C these things were happening and developing. And conversations I was having on campus and off, definitely off, but also on, contributed.

[01:01:44]

KG: In what sense was the undergraduate institution violent?

AC: Well...I mean, I think there's a lot of it that is just about being a twenty-something white person in our society right now that is—to find irony in things, and finds...there's an individualism and all those things, and those conflicts that I was talking about where the divisions around WBC started to feel very alienating. And I started to feel very much like—not like there wasn't an impact, but very frustrated with this idea that we could go to class and think about things and be done, and then we could make fun of whoever we wanted to make fun of because we were smart people, and the way that we did it was different. And my friendships and my relationships at U of C weren't necessarily like that, but some of them were, and the ones outside it were—like, you couldn't bring them into dialogue with this, because it felt hurtful. And more and more—I would say that 5710 was helpful in developing that sense of what—like, this is actually a hurtful place to be, to remain in this kind of self, this pseudo-self-mocking ironic hipsterism, but also individualist bubble sphere. Which is not to say that that is all that the U of C is, but there

was a pervasive stream of thinking.

KG: Has your perception changed at all since being removed from the university for a little while?

AC: I like to think I'm actually more charitable about the university now. Thinking about it, and thinking about its impact. Than I was when I graduated. I think that I definitely went through the withdrawal period of never wanting to go back, and not engage—and I definitely haven't engaged as much with the queer community at the university as I thought I would, even as an alumni. But I hear they're doing wonderful things. And the ones I talk to are—I still talk to individuals, and that makes me feel good and happy. To know what good people are doing.

KG: Do you want to just talk briefly about what you did after college, if that's okay? You went immediately to the SSA, and then you started working immediately after that?

AC: So I went to the SSA. I walked twice. I walked in 2010, and I walked in 2011. And then I worked as a wedding coordinator at Bond Chapel for a few months. That was fun.

KG: Really? How did you get that job?

AC: That was a hookup. Just kidding. That was very lucky. Elizabeth Davenport is great, I worked with great people there. Also, it was kind of an absurdist thing to be young and queer and having the entire nation talking about weddings, and facilitating other people's weddings. It was just very funny. But after that, I was, I became gainfully employed at the IMPACT program, which is an LGBT health and development program. It's a research group out of Northwestern, so actually, boo, hiss, I'm working at Northwestern. But yeah. I do research, I usually do participant recruitment and retention on studies that have to do with LGBT sexual health, mental health, development.

KG: Mm-hm. And that's sort of in line with sociology and social work and so on?

AC: Yeah. They're a little more psychologically-focused than my background. But my background is definitely helpful.

KG: Yeah. Let's see. We can talk about your partner if you want—how you met them, if they're associated with the U of C.

AC: Mm... No.

KG: Okay. Let's see. As far as change over time goes, do you think there's any generational differences that should be noted about U of C's queer life?

AC: Mm. Yeah. I really enjoy talking to alumni, and people who came before me about their experience. I think we have kind of a bias of thinking that our experiences are unique, but they're not. That certain things have changed and certain things haven't. That students still

get called “faggots” at certain parties or that members of U of C sports teams still feel—there are members of sports teams that still don't feel comfortable living an out life. And that all of those things are changing—within this larger changing context, but that these things are happening is always interesting to me when I have conversations with previous alumni who talk about their experiences, and noting both similarities and differences. And the way that they would create community. That they would have secret meet-up spots or they would have these groups, Gay Liberation Front, they would have started these groups or little communities in the same way that I feel like we started and held our own spaces around campus.

KG: Why did you decide to be emailed for this project, besides my constant emailing?

AC: I mean, that was very helpful, in terms of being involved. I like to talk, and I really wanted to get rid of these photos, but to a good home, so this is a good way to do it. I also have a lot of nostalgia about U of C and being U of C gay. It was a really fun and valuable and important part of my life. I think everybody struggles to find the same kind of community after, and I don't think I'm struggling to find that community, but there are things that—it is clear to me that being able to create those spaces was unique. Yeah. I also cry every time I pass 5710. I know that is not related. But I really do miss it. Whatever. I do go back and I am in touch with people. But I really, really do feel like that is unique. And the time spent there with Q&A with all of that.

KG: How would you...what would your opinion be on presenting the stories of LGBT alumni? How do you think that would be well-done?

AC: It's a good idea.

KG: And how do you think oral history can be [worked into] the exhibition? Or both, or something else that we should be doing?

AC: I like voices. One of the things that stand out most to you, or are most powerful was at...CGS? CSGS?

KG: I always call it CSGS.

AC: CSGS. Okay. At CSGS, they had, one Alumni Weekend, they had an LGBT campus panel or something like that. They had three of us come who were current students, and older alumni came because they were back for Alumni Weekend of whatever. So these queer alumni were there talking about—they were there to listen to what it was like to be there, but really we just wanted to listen to them. They shared some really interesting stuff and we were able to repartee with what we thought was going on now, and that was such a cool—probably one of the coolest lunch groups, lunch discussions I ever went to at the U of C. There were echoes of my own experience in there. And so if there are ways—if that's the feeling, that I would want to give people? Partly I think that oral history has that opportunity. I think those photos, I think photos should be shown from every Genderfuck at every Genderfuck. To think about that history about gender play at

the university is also really interesting. And there's a lot of change there as well. So I think the visual definitely has importance. I'm kind of interested in what other stuff people have from back in the day.

KG: I'm sure that Lauren [Stokes] and Monica [Mercado] will keep in touch. I'm graduating so I don't know what will happen. But Lauren and Monica will keep in touch with you as this project continues. Is there anything else you want to say before we end the interview?

AC: Mm...I guess I'll go on record saying that I think the official age of Genderfuck is 31, but I'm not sure. We calculated it out one year. And then we decided that it was just 29 forever, but.

KG: That'll be useful to Lauren, who's been looking into that sort of thing. I'm going to turn this off now.

[1:12:02]

End of Interview