

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**INTERVIEW #74
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[00:00:00 to 00:01:20: KR goes through demographic sheet with MD.]

KR: How did you end up at the University? How did you find yourself there?

MD: I was going to math graduate school and I ended up having a fellowship from the NSF that let me, late in the game, choose where I wanted to go. I went to Chicago because—I had been planning to go to Cornell—but I went to Chicago because they had, at the time they were famous for this kind of boot-camp first year program and I wanted to get all my classwork out of the way. I had been maybe kind of a lazy student in college and I thought that would, I would learn a lot of math all at once and get a running start on grad school. I didn't actually plan to stay after the first year. I thought I was just gonna come for the first year of the PhD program and then transfer back, but then I really liked it, so I stayed.

KR: What were your expectations there, and were they fulfilled, were they not?

MD: I actually really liked Chicago, as I was saying, more than I expected. It's got a reputation at least in the circles I'm in for being a pretty conservative place, and indeed it was kind of true that I was a little bit the freak of the math department. It is a very interesting place. There's like 100, 120 math PhD students at a time, and a lot are very Christian, there's some sort of maybe tradition there. There's also a bunch of homeschooled kids. There's like 17 and 18 year olds starting graduate school there every year. It's a pretty particular culture. At least when I was there, there were years when out of the 110 people, I was the only out queer, which is kind of striking. A bunch of my classmates, I was the first one they'd ever met, which was kind of amazing by the time you're in your mid-20s.

KR: Where did you do your undergrad?

[00:03:28]

MD: At Harvard.

KR: What did you find different between the social atmospheres? I'm sure part of it's being a grad student as well.

MD: That is true, but I kind of hated Harvard, and I loved Chicago, and I ended up wishing I'd gone there for undergrad, because—I think it's changed now in the math department anyway, but at the time that I was there, it was like world-class professors but who actually gave you the time of day, whereas at Harvard, they always made you feel that you should have left their office 5 minutes ago, and I kind of needed, maybe not encouragement, but a little bit of attention. I felt like at Chicago, besides the fact that the professors would actually talk to you, also there were post-docs who would talk to you, and I don't know, I just enjoyed the whole gargoyles and turtlenecks, Where Fun Comes to Die broader atmosphere. It just kind of worked for me. I also enjoyed living in Hyde Park, which I know a lot of people complain about. Chicago was a pleasant surprise after the other places I'd spent time, it was the first one where I was like, 'Yeah, I chose right.'

KR: What about queer life between Harvard and UChicago?

MD: I was at Harvard in the mid-90s. I was there from 93 to 97, and there just was really little lesbian visibility on campus while I was there. Most of my queer social life was off-campus as an undergrad. I was doing Lesbian Avengers stuff in Boston, which was great for me. The campus wasn't really home to a lot of queer social life. There was alphabet soup-named club, of which I was at some point the president, but it was a lot of gay men, and... it was nice, it was perfectly nice, but it wasn't where I found my social contacts. There was also at Harvard, while I was there, there was a peer counseling group on sexuality issues. That was more of a community, so I was a part of that, too, for a little while. At Chicago, there were more queers, of course. As you say, though, I was also a graduate student. It's a different scene, but I got to know people in various departments. I'd been playing rugby in college—amazingly, I was the only out queer on my rugby team in college. I'm not even kidding, that's just like so strange, still to think about. Of course, they all came out later, many of them. I played and I coached a little bit the rugby team at Chicago, and that was a nice little community. I taught gender studies, I co-taught one of those 101 classes when I was there. Getting involved with the Center was a good way to meet interesting queers in various departments. Some in History or Anthropology or English or various places. So, I had more of a sense of queer community at Chicago, on campus, that is.

KR: When did you first come out or start to realize that you were queer?

MD: Oh, um, you know, early teens. I guess I started to realize somewhere after twelve. Started to talk about it about 15.

KR: So you were already out when you got to Harvard.

[00:07:03]

MD: I mean, yeah, sure. I mean, certainly, instantly, by the time I was there—in high school, I think I was pretty out, too, in my public school. I just went to my 20-year high school reunion, actually, two weeks ago, Thanksgiving. It's so interesting to see how people turn out. Yeah, no, it's news to no one that I'm gay.

KR: What else were you involved in when you were at UChicago?

MD: Campus activity-wise?

KR: Yeah.

MD: Let's see. So I was involved a little bit with the Center for Gender Studies, and with the rugby team as I said. I practiced karate on campus for a few years; that was awesome. What other kinds of campus activities was I involved in? Let's see. Nothing else organized comes to mind.

KR: What about the informal atmosphere of just friendships? How did those things develop, who did you meet? How did you build a friendship network?

MD: I had some close friends in the med school, and—yeah, I don't know that I have anything organized to say about that, but you know how it goes. You make a few close friends and then build out a little community around that. I did socialize off-campus a lot, too. Spent a fair amount of time in Wicker Park and Andersonville and whatever. Throughout grad school, I was dating various people at different moments that brought the center of gravity of my social life to different parts of the city.

KR: Can you talk more about your dating history at the University?

MD: Sure, yeah, so I was—I had just gotten out of my long, serious college relationship when I got there. For a couple years, I dated an MD-PhD student who actually transitioned around the time we were splitting up. Then I dated a kind of theater director world activist who was involved in youth organization up in Albany Park for the rest of the time that I was there and into my post-doc afterward. Pretty much just those two, more or less.

KR: You mentioned that you're involved with other things in the city, can you talk a little bit more about that?

MD: Again, I'm not sure I'll be able to point at any infrastructure, but I had a bunch of friends who lived up Edgewater way, so there were coffee shops or places to hang out and I got to be friends with someone who was sort of involved in a poetry scene, so I'd go to a bunch of readings and stuff like that. That kind of thing.

KR: What about, were you involved with any activism, or were there any issues on campus

that you felt like were problems that needed to be addressed or that you were addressing?

[00:10:55]

MD: One thing that you probably have already heard something about is, towards the end of the time that I was there, there was the gender-neutral bathrooms campaign that some undergrads had gotten some momentum on and asked me to give them advice because I'd been involved in a bunch of organizing pre-Chicago. I tried to help out with that, and that ended up being a kind of interesting experience. The idea was to get some bathrooms repurposed—single-stall, so anybody can use them. This group of people met with the administration a few times, met with some assistant deans or whatever. That turned out to be really easy lifting. There wasn't much pushback, because it wasn't hard. We weren't asking for anything complicated. I think my favorite part of that story is that the biggest point that the administrators were hung up on was the question, 'What kind of signage should there be on the door?' Apparently there's some sort of law that says that you have to have not just an English word but some sort of image, and so the dean we were talking to said, 'What should it be? Should it be a man symbol and a woman symbol? Should it be some sort of combination of the cartoon of a man and a woman?' We were all sitting there feeling a little stumped and confused that this should be an issue when one of the guys in our group said, 'How about a picture of a toilet?' We were all like, you know, lightning flash! So that side was easy and nobody on campus cared. There was no collection of curmudgeons on campus who were gonna mind about that.

What ended up happening was it got picked up by the Chicago Sun, and I was the only person they could reach for a quote, so I had some completely bland quote, like, 'Who could possibly object?' Somehow from the Sun it got picked up by all these right-wing blogs and it ended up that Rush Limbaugh picked it up, and oh, that was charming! Other than the right-wing blog blowback, the only other notable thing that I can remember about that is that we staged a drag show to raise awareness for why this should be an issue, because what I found when talking to people about gender-neutral bathrooms was that people who hadn't thought about it before were like, 'Boy, that sounds silly, who could possibly care?' The fact that it got so little actual resistance made us think that, 'Hey, this is a moment when we can kind of educate people about why this is a big deal in some folks' lives.'

Other than that, there was also a moment sometime around then when there'd been some anti-gay small kerfuffles on campus. One of the frats did something silly, maybe there was the slightest hint of a violent altercation, I can't even really remember the details, but I remember at the time thinking, 'Hey, we need to make a little bit of noise,' so we brought in a speaker maybe to talk, to try to talk about it. Right, Chicago's a funny place, because unlike most other schools, the frat culture is a little marginal, there's not a big kind of toga-wearing Greek presence in the kind of classic campus way, but still we wanted to try to bring in a speaker to address homophobia and masculinity issues straight to that frat sector of campus, so we brought in this guy Jackson Katz who talks about sports and masculinity. He does it pretty well. He came and gave a talk that was quasi-required for a lot of the frat sector. Those are the things that come to mind.

KR: What about, you mentioned that you taught one of the gender studies, co-taught one of the gender studies classes. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:15:22]

MD: Sure, yeah, I did that with Elaine Hadley in the English department, who's a Victorianist, I think. That class, at least at the time, was called Problems in Gender Studies, and it was just an introduction to what is gender studies about, and what are the tools of analysis, and so on. She and I, of course, had totally different ways of thinking about it. So like, I remember I wanted a science unit and a pornography unit, and she maybe had slightly more classical ideas, but we actually worked together very well. I quite remember, we had 10 to 15 students or something. I'm still in touch with several of them. It was actually a really good experience.

KR: So it was Problems in Gender Studies? Because now we have Problems in the Study of Gender and Problems in the Study of Sexuality are the two intro classes for the major.

MD: There was a sexuality class then, too, but I thought it wasn't, didn't have quite the core status, but I could be wrong.

KR: Do you think that the curriculum was more gender-focused at the time? I know there've been a lot more sexuality-based classes lately, that they recently added sexuality to the name of the Center.

MD: Yeah, here too, at Tufts, they just added that too... I could be getting mixed up, everybody seems to be doing it. Let's see, yeah, so, it was, we tried to be intersectional, so we talked about gender and race issues, and we talked about sexuality, for sure. The problematic of gender was definitely at the center of the way we thought about the class. Being a survey class, it wasn't supposed to be super duper coherent, and so we grabbed a little bit from a lot of areas... Actually, one thing I remember I did for that class was, I wanted to talk about gender studies as a way of thinking and reading the world, and so I remember I spent a couple months before the class started collecting news clippings that I thought could be talked about in an interesting way. I remember, I went down to like Kinko's or something and I made a little bound up copy of all these news clippings to give out and have them go through and look at them after the class, at the end of the class, and be able to talk about them differently. I thought that was kind of a neat little gambit.

KR: Yeah, that is interesting. What about, when you were at Harvard, did you study gender studies at all?

MD: Yeah, I was a double major, they don't call it that of course, Harvard never calls it what everybody else does. But I had two "concentrations," in Math and Women's Studies.

KR: What was your experience like with the gender studies at Harvard?

MD: Well, it was Women's Studies, and it was a little bit old school. What was my experience? I had wanted to do Math and Philosophy and the kind of philosophy that thinks about—what you'd now call feminist philosophy, I suppose, is what I had in mind, but I found that that kind of—that style of philosophy wasn't gonna happen at Harvard in the Philosophy department, so Women's Studies seemed like a home to be able to think about that sort of stuff. At the time that I was there, the director was on leave, it was kind of a skeleton crew running the place, and it felt a little bit for me—I mean, look, I'm very grateful to them, they made it possible for me to do the project that I wanted to be able to do as a senior thesis, they were in that sense a big tent, but it was tough to get intellectual engagement from particular professors. It was kind of a missed opportunity because I ended up writing a thesis for them about what a feminist philosophy of math would look like, and they couldn't really find readers who knew what to do with it. The funny thing is there were people on campus that they just weren't making contact with who would have been perfect. There were kind of some missed opportunities there. But still, I took some phenomenal classes, so it was a good experience in that way.

[00:19:56]

KR: And you mentioned you had organizing experience before you came to Chicago, what did you do before?

MD: Mostly through Lesbian Avengers, which I mentioned before. It was a funny time, right, because the Avengers I think are, if I remember it right, are an 80s creation, and kind of co-evolved with ACT UP and used to be maybe a little bit more of a grown-up group, but in the 90s in Boston, it was really a bunch of college kids trying to figure out how to do activism and it was very, like,... It was sort of the kids' table of the activist world. We were doing really mild kind of stuff. I remember one action was to invade freshman orientation at Boston University because the president of BU, John Silber, I guess you're maybe from around here, so maybe you've heard of him. He was this retrograde dinosaur democrat massively anti-gay kind of horror show. So, we wanted to protest him—he was very powerful in Massachusetts Democratic party—and some of the crazy things he had said at BU, like if gay students don't like the culture here, they can transfer out. We went in and we had smuggled in these banners and we unfurled the banners while he was talking and threw candy out into the audience and tried to be subversive, but we were way too polite and he had the microphone, and I remember he kind of shouted us down in a way that was a little bit distressing, but you know, things like that. That was the tenor of it. It was playful. I mean, that's the Lesbian Avengers' style, I guess, is kind of playful activism. Consciousness-raising through theater in a way.

KR: You mentioned that you felt like at Harvard the groups were kind of dominated by gay men.

MD: Numerically, for sure.

KR: Yeah, did you feel like when you got to Chicago, it was a more diverse group, or was it still sort of disproportionate?

MD: Well, but I wasn't in some sort of student group at Chicago. I mean, I think one existed, Queers & Associates rings a bell, does that exist?

KR: Yeah.

MD: But I was never really involved, so I can't really comment on the make-up, yeah, because I was a graduate student. But, I mean, my social queer world on campus was definitely split men and women.

KR: Were there any graduate organizations that you knew of for...?

[00:22:35]

MD: No.

KR: OK. Did you go directly from Harvard to Chicago, or did you have...?

MD: I had one year in between, which I spent at Cornell, which is sort of, I mentioned that I thought I would stay there for grad school.

KR: And then where did you go right after Chicago?

MD: Right after Chicago, in fact, my last year of my PhD, I had a fellowship that allowed me to be off-campus, so I had already moved out to the Bay Area before finishing. I was there for three more years after finishing it. I was a post-doc at UC Davis.

KR: Can you talk a little bit about your time there, what you...?

MD: Um, yeah, sure. Let's see. So, Davis is about 60 miles from Berkeley and there's a train, so I lived in Berkeley pretty much the whole time I was there and just took the train up to Davis a few days a week to do my teaching and to go to seminars and do math stuff up there. I didn't end up getting involved with anything kind of gender studies related at Davis. I wasn't there all that much. I got a little bit involved with STS--Science and Technology Studies. They were doing anthropology of science in a feminist way, so that was still a connection. Living in Berkeley was, of course, great, as Berkeley is. I wasn't involved in any kind of organized gay anything there, but of course, it's a very queer part of the world, so... my social world definitely was still in the queer village. Again, sort of mixed men and women and people I just met through various things.

KR: So, how did you, how did that differ from Chicago and from Harvard?

MD: As a place to be a queer?

KR: Generally, but yeah, the queer scene and generally just like the social life.

MD: I guess, Chicago, I always get the sense that Chicago is just really spread out, right, and so there are little patches where people live, patches you get to know, but you never really get a feel for the whole city. And Berkeley's much much smaller. You know, I obviously spent some time in Oakland and San Francisco and nearby areas, but Berkeley feels a little bit more like a bubble. It's a very queer place, like you just walk around and feel—you know, actually, where I felt that was when I moved from there to Michigan, that was a rude shock, because I had sort of gotten used to a world full of sunshine, good produce, and lots of queers, right? That was a tough transition. But yeah, in a lot of places, you need, like in Chicago, that's an example of a place where being part of a queer community can make you feel like you're dealing with a town within a city; there's a city, but there's also this smaller community where people know each other. That's just completely superfluous in the Bay Area, I feel, because, first of all, it doesn't really feel much smaller, it's not an order of magnitude smaller—and the scope of the whole world is less urban there. It didn't feel as much like a need to cultivate a specific queer network.

[00:26:52]

KR: So after there, you went to Michigan? Can you talk more about what things were like in Michigan?

MD: Yeah, so, I was in Michigan for three years, but I had a funny arrangement with the University, that, in terms of my job, that I only ended up teaching in the fall semesters and not in the springs all three years, so I would go somewhere else every spring. Also partly because I was having a hard time adjusting to living there, it didn't work so well for me as a place to live. So, yeah, I was there for half of each of three years, so I maybe never really gave it a chance or put down roots, but there were so many things that were a little bit shocking to me about Ann Arbor, such as, like, the city that it's close to is Detroit, and it's just about as close as Davis is to San Francisco, but nobody in Ann Arbor goes to Detroit. Like, you'd find people who'd been at the University for five years and had never set foot in Detroit, never gotten farther than the airport in that direction. Ann Arbor itself was not very diverse racially or economically, it looked to me. It was tougher for me to adjust. Of course, there are lots of queers, but they all feel like they're coupled up and hibernating. That was my sense of the place.

KR: So, where did you go during those spring semesters?

MD: I spent the first one in Paris, and then I met someone there and got into a serious relationship and she came back with me, and so then together we spent the next spring in Chicago, back in Chicago, and then the third here in Boston as a transition to moving here.

KR: When did you move here?

MD: In the middle of my last year at Michigan, which would be 2008, I guess.

KR: So, what has it been like?

MD: Is that right? No no no, 2008 is when I moved to Michigan, so 2011 would be when I moved here.

KR: OK. What has it been like living here now?

MD: It's been great. I knew already that I really liked this area, I had friends here. I had been really hoping to get—in fact, we moved here before I had so much as an interview in the area, and so as an academic to end up with a job in the place that you have selected as the place that you want to live is just incredibly lucky, so that felt really good.

KR: Did you reconnect with people from Harvard?

[00:29:30]

MD: Yeah, a bunch of my friends from college are still here, and then other friends of mine have moved here since, and then I've met new people also. It's nice. I have a fairly big network of people here.

KR: Have you been involved with like queer things at Tufts at all?

MD: Yes, yeah, I have. There's a center, there's an LGBT Center that is doing really great work. It's funny, I wonder if Harvard has something like that now, but, like, there's a staff at the center that's just able to keep up a level of programming that I would have just absolutely loved as an undergrad. I've been really impressed with some of the events that they've put on. Like, there was something last year called, 'This is what a queer family looks like,' or something like that, and they just brought in people to talk about how they started their family, with their kids and so on, and oh man, I was dying for some lesbian role models as an undergrad. It's funny, I was thinking about this, but it's not until fairly recently that I've known, like, long-time lesbian couples. When I was in high school, there was this one couple of teachers at my high school who were obviously a lesbian couple and I tried to talk to one of them and just be like, 'Tell me about being a grown-up dyke,' and she wouldn't talk to me, she wouldn't do it. I guess they had some sort of deal that they wouldn't talk to students or admit that they were gay out loud or something. It just took me a really long time to get to see what a stable gay relationship might look like. Anyway, I'm just impressed around here, they do some really nice stuff. I've been involved--sometimes I go to their panels and things. I try to be very out on campus. Students come talk to me, too, but also I do some of the events when I can.

KR: You're talking about role models, did you find any role models when you were in Chicago or elsewhere? Like, who do you think you met that you felt like were important role models?

MD: You know, at Harvard, actually, now that I think about it, they had, so they have these houses, which are like the dorms. There are people who live in the houses to sort of make themselves available to students. They're called tutors; it's just a holdover from the

British system. So they'll be maybe an economics tutor or whatever, and in my house we actually had a "sexuality tutor," which I thought was the funniest name ever, right, like she's gonna show you the ropes. But she was a writing teacher and was probably in her mid-30s at the time. I got to know her and she was a fantastic... I don't even know what role model means, but she was a great influence and it was really good for me to see a little bit about what her world looked like. I got to know her well enough to know a little bit about her love life and a little bit about her life arc and that was great. That's what comes to mind, so good job Harvard, for making that resource available.

KR: Oh, I forgot to ask about this, when you were in Chicago, did you live in Hyde Park, or...?

MD: Yeah, almost the whole time. With other guys from my math program.

[00:33:36]

KR: You mentioned that there were times where you were the only queer person in the department

MD: Out.

KR: Out queer person. What was that experience like?

MD: I was part of a pretty big entering class, we were like 26 in my cohort. I definitely felt some significant homophobia from my peers. What was funny was that this was grad school and I was amazed to be dealing with it from age-mates in academia at that late date. It was a surprise. I felt like it made it harder to negotiate the... the first year program is really rigorous. I felt like it made it a little harder to negotiate. There was just a lot of bullshit. I did sometimes feel a little bit excluded from, even from intellectually relevant groups. So... what was the question?

KR: Just... what your experience was like being in the department as one of the only out...

MD: Oh, being sort of the only one out. Well, so, it was like that. I didn't think it really mattered in my relationships with faculty. Whereas, at Harvard, as an undergrad, the faculty made it perfectly clear that they thought I was very strange. That was evident. At Chicago, it wasn't an issue. I had a good relationship with my advisor, one I still have, a good working relationship with my advisor, but we're not like, buddies.

KR: Do you feel like that was maybe part of the reason you started trying to find friends in other departments?

MD: Well, but that's always been important to me. A lot of mathematicians conduct their entire social lives in the math world and I would go insane. I just, like, for me, the social life—there's really nice people in the math world, obviously, but the social life revolves around this, like, clubby beer-driven mode that I've always felt like a little bit of an outsider in,

and I don't think it's just because I'm a woman, I don't think it's just because I'm queer. I just think it's whatever combination of effects. It doesn't make me feel completely socially at home in the math world. I've always sought out a social life elsewhere. Also, my intellectual interests take me to other types of humanities departments, as well. So, it works out.

KR: Can you talk a little bit, your thesis, your undergraduate thesis sounds really interesting. Can you talk a little bit about that?

MD: Sure. Well, I wrote two, because I was doing Math and Women's Studies and I didn't think they were going to both accept anything. So, I wrote a thesis for the Math Department, and I wrote a thesis for Women's Studies, and the Women's Studies thesis was, yeah, I had been reading this kind of science studies literature, feminist critiques of science. Nobody ever talked about math and I wanted to understand whether you could extend some of the analyses, so like, some of the oldest science studies, feminist science studies literature has to do with projections of sex-talk in places where it's inappropriate. Like, what are the primatologists projecting onto their subjects because of their biases about male and female? Then, people started to look beyond sexed subjects and into other kinds of biology, where you'd say, 'Oh, maybe when you're studying these molecules, you're making projections of sex and gender?' But you're not going to make that kind of case in math, I don't think. So, I wanted to understand, what can you say? What I ended up largely deciding is that you can make an interesting analysis of math that way, but the way it's gonna work is it's gonna ask, 'What are the social arrangements in math? Who gets to be designated an expert and how? How do they get authority in the field?' So that's where your feminist analysis is going to get some traction.

[00:38:12]

KR: Were there any notable events that happened while you were at Chicago that you can think of?

MD: Can you be....

KR: Just like, of queer things that happened, whether it was in Chicago or at the University, or something that you remember happening nationally, but you remember the reactions of people.

MD: Well, I mean, when I was there, there were some elections. I was there for both Bush elections. W Bush. That was.... I remember after the second one, the second one was kind of a shock. Let me try and think back to the time I was there. Maybe for the second one, I was already kind of mostly in California by then. But, I remember Tim Stewart-Winter, is he someone you've talked to?

KR: No.

MD: You should probably talk to Tim. So, he does gay history, he was in the history

department. Well, he does many kinds of history, but also gay history. But I remember he and I organized some sort of meeting after, discussion event after one of those Bush elections, it must have been the second one, yeah. To try and say, 'What happened?' Because that was also the year that all the gay marriage bans were kind of on the ballots as a strategy of the Republican party and you could make the case that it had an impact on the outcome of the Presidential race. Of course, Ken Mehlman was orchestrating all that. So, we convened a whole bunch of people. A lot of us were kind of shell-shocked after that election, just to sort of say what happened. Otherwise, in the larger world.... I was there a lot of years [laughs], so I guess a bunch of things happened. You know, another thing that happened after that second Bush election was I had known plenty of people who voted for Bush in 2000, but I didn't know anyone who'd voted for Bush in 2004, and he won, right? As you may know. So, I wrote an email to the whole graduate student list in the math department and I said, 'Look, there's so many of us, someone must have voted for Bush this time. I don't wanna yell at you, I just wanna talk to you, will you tell me if you're one of these Bush voters and just get together and have coffee with me for 30 minutes and just explain, like, just tell me what you're thinking.' And one guy did. He took me up on it, we sat down, we had coffee, he told me about the decline of Western civilization, and the creeping menace of homosexuality [laughs]. He actually told me that, as the reasons that he felt compelled to vote for Bush. And then at some point in the middle of the conversation, I turned to him—after he was explaining homosexuality to me for a while as like hedonism and self-interest and so on—and then at some point in the middle of this conversation, I said to him, 'You do know I'm gay, right?' And he, like, jumped out of his seat, you know? The funniest. But no, I actually really appreciated that someone was willing to spell it all out for me.

[00:41:49]

KR: So what about now being a professor here, do you find yourself at all in like a mentorship kind of role? Maybe not mentor, but like now being an advisor kind of thing to students? Like, you mention that students would come talk to you.

MD: Definitely. I do have—well, this is only my third year here, so I haven't been here super long, but I—first, one thing is, you know, when I teach calculus here, then there are multiple sections that kind of meet at the same time and students can sort of pick based on, can sort themselves a little bit. And you can see that my classes, I think, are like more diverse in various ways and I find that pretty gratifying. But yeah, students come talk to me. Sometimes, they'll come and come out and that's great, I try to be really supportive. Sometimes, you can see that they're not quite ready to come out, but they wanna talk, kind of obliquely, about gay issues, and I'll totally play that game with you. Also, I get to know lots of students who aren't necessarily queer and I take a serious interest in them. I still am in touch—I've been teaching at the college level since that year I was at Cornell before I started grad school in 1998, so it's already getting to be 15 years or something of teaching, and I stay in touch with a lot of my former students. I make personal connections with a lot of them, which is great. Which is really, this job can be a huge pain in the ass, but that's one of the best parts. I like to think, I don't know about role model, but advisor, or just someone to form a relationship with, definitely, I definitely think of

myself that way.

KR: What about working with other departments and stuff here, have you done anything with that?

MD: Well, I taught history of math here. Which I fought to get cross-listed, not with other departments, but in terms of distribution requirements. I took a philosophy class last year and I have been talking to the department here about co-creating a class with the philosophy department, a philosophy of math class. The gender studies--you know what, is it a department? You can never quite tell what the status is!—program/department here. I'm probably going to get on the steering committee for that next fall. They are interested in having me teach a gender studies class. Oh, while I was at Michigan, I should say, they had me develop a syllabus for a feminist science studies class, and I was supposed to teach it and then they cancelled it at the last minute, so that was sad. But so I was in touch with the Women's Studies people at Michigan, definitely. Yeah, and so the Gender Studies folks here would like me to do something, but I'm not quite sure how my department would take to that idea. It's a much easier sell if you cross-list than if you just go teach for someone else. So, I don't know how that'll play out, but I love the idea of being involved in steering the direction of the program here.

Also, Tufts has, besides--I was mentioning the LGBT Center, but they also have a fantastic Women's Center that's really also engaged in lots of queer issues, and I've been involved with them, too. I spoke at one of their symposia. They do this really fun dinner-and-a-movie thing where they pick some pop culture movie and then get a professor in to give a feminist analysis. So I did that recently, it was really fun. I'm trying to get, you know, as you see here, since here we sit in the Math department, it's not on the quad, it's not in the main part of campus, it's a little bit off in a corner, so it takes some effort at Tufts in the Math department to be engaged with the rest of campus, but I am making that effort.

[00:46:03]

KR: With feminist things you were involved with, what were the intersections of queerness and feminism? Did you find that that changed at all over time, or it seemed sort of the same?

MD: In what context?

KR: Well, just, over time, did you find that feminism and queerness were always so compatible, or did you ever feel like they were diverging, or...?

MD: You mean, like, in academic contexts, or just in life broadly?

KR: Just in life broadly, because I know feminism could be more queer or less friendly over different times.

MD: Um, right. By the time I was in college already, it was well into the so-called third wave, so that, the kind of feminism that's allergic to queer issues was already passé. What I will say is, it's been interesting to watch the various queer organizations I've been involved in contend with trans inclusion, so that, for instance, in the 90s when I was doing Lesbian Avengers stuff here in Boston, what actually, it was amazing to see, but what actually cracked up the group—it was quite a big and robust group—and what actually cracked it up were issues of trans inclusion. Like, there was a good, I don't know, a third to a half of the core people just didn't think that either FTM or MTF people should be welcome in the Avengers and the rest of us thought they were insane. So, I got to see that. And the whole Michigan Womyn's Festival Camp Trans thing. I never went to that partly because I thought the trans exclusion again was kind of insane. But, I knew that was going on at the time and other people were more involved in negotiating that. I would say that there were those kind of fault lines more than, like, feminist fault lines along queer issues.

KR: What about, with trans inclusion and stuff, have you seen a difference between the places you were in, or?

MD: Yeah, I mean, a big difference is that the Bay Area, it's not just that you see queers everywhere. The trans visibility is so high in the Bay Area. Just feels like a non-issue, nobody's—at least at the time, you know, I was there later. But, that didn't feel like so much a thing. Here, I hear things with amazement, like, that Tufts this year just added lots of trans coverage to the student health care package, which is amazing, I just couldn't have imagined that when I was in college. Sex reassignment is now covered by student insurance, holy shit, you know? Definitely a new era.

KR: What about, you were mentioning the whole gender-neutral bathroom campaigns, how did you find the atmosphere around trans issues within that campaign and at UChicago?

[00:49:41]

MD: Well, you know, OK, so when that was happening, that must have been, 2003 or something, and when that was happening, there was this wave of, this big wave of transitions happening in the lesbian community, there were just lots of people coming out as F to M, or somewhere along a transitioning path. All at once, just a big crush. So, I don't think there was any kind of negativity around that, but there were a lot of people kind of figuring out how to talk and how to negotiate those things. So, I personally had plenty of friends and, as I mentioned, even the person I was dating was kind of going through some of this, and so for me, it was obvious that there was this whole collection of people for whom bathrooms were this kind of incredibly unpleasant battleground. It's funny, because, you know, this never ever ever happens to me anymore, but when I was in college, I used to also sometimes get people to wig out on me in the bathrooms, like I was in the airport or something using a bathroom, to get told I was using the wrong bathroom. Which never happens to me anymore, I'm not really sure, if people think I look that different. Maybe the world has changed, I don't know. So, yeah, there was a certain amount of consciousness-raising to do around that just to get people to imaginatively project themselves into other lives. But, I never felt that was super

contentious.

KR: What about just like the resources on campus— did you, do you feel like, I know you mentioned now the healthcare at Tufts is covering reassignment surgeries—do you think that the resources here are more robust for trans students in general than they were at UChicago, or do you think those things are starting to develop more?

MD: I mean, yeah. Some things... I had, when I was an undergrad, I had one friend who transitioned at Harvard, and he was wrestling a little bit with the administration about things like, in the official paperwork, what would his name be? What dorm would he be in? and so on. And Harvard was actually pretty good about that stuff. He was relatively impressed. At Chicago, I also remember a couple of my friends who transitioned as students talking about things like getting Chicago to officially change their name in the system.

KR: They just passed a new name policy this fall.

MD: Oh? Yeah, what I found at both Harvard and Chicago, that was really interesting in that respect was that uniformly, the administrators were sympathetic, but there was fear about precedents, setting precedents. So, they would do whatever the fuck you wanted informally, but they sort of wouldn't want to write it down or be bound to have to do it in the future. So, like, you had to decide which battle you were fighting. The battle to get X done for yourself, or the battle to, like, change Harvard's policies about it, or Chicago's. Those were just really two quite different battles.

KR: Do you know if Tufts has, like, advisory committees or anything that students are on for advising the LGBTQ life thing? Because I know UChicago started a lot of that recently and it's sort of a, I can't really tell if it's for us to actually be able to talk to the administration or for the administration to be able to act like they're listening to us.

[00:53:29]

MD: I mean, yeah, it's always a little of both, totally. I think there are--I know there's a faculty queer advisory board that's supposed to report to the President and the upper administration, and one could ask the same question. I found, speaking of setting precedents, I found, when I was here, I was trying to—I was in a binational relationship with a woman I met in France, as I mentioned, and trying to get Tufts to sort of step up and give some sort of help in trying to keep her in the country and do the very basic things, and I found that even though... Tom Bourdon, the director of the LGBT Center, told me at some point that if you count out faculty as the ones who will let you list their names in print, then I was the only out lesbian faculty here, which is, by the way, stunning. And yet, I found that it didn't rate with the administration as a diversity issue. And so they were really pretty unhelpful. They were really starkly, like, it was actually a little bit distressing how unhelpful they were, because, as an institution, they could have very cheaply fixed what was a very vexing, difficult problem, and they didn't really wanna do that. So, again, I think there's a lot of anxiety about precedent-setting. I've

come to think that a lot of institutional inertia is really about that... I haven't quite understood why yet, but I think for the individual administrators, it does unwind to a worry about precedent a lot of the time.

KR: So, have you found differences in how the Tufts deals with faculty than students and how they respond to queer issues around that?

MD: Oh, well, for sure. I find that Tufts, and this isn't just a Tufts thing, this is a depressing national trend at universities, is to treat the undergrads as like your clients. And so I do think there's a little bit of a smiley face that points towards the students and then behind the scenes is another story.

KR: Yeah, I think in interviewing people, we've found that professors and faculty and even grad students at UChicago have had very different experiences than the undergrads with the administration.

MD: We actually had an appalling meeting here in the department a few months ago where a dean, fairly high up, came to us and, in the context of explaining how the budget works, said to us, 'Don't forget, it's the undergraduate tuition that keeps the lights on, so if you want to do anything around here, you ask yourself, 'How does it directly benefit the undergraduates?'' I think we all threw up a little bit in our mouths, you know, because, you'd like to think you have this educational mission, but no.

KR: Do you have any final thoughts or anything you'd wanna add?

MD: Let me think. No, nothing comes to mind. I think it's great that you're doing this. I think, of course, for me it's hard to think about my memories of my time at Chicago or these other places as having any historical interest, but of course, that's because for me, it's Now. So, it's really nice that you're doing this so that later accounts, longitudinally, will get at the evolution of the institutions.

KR: Yeah, and it's interesting. We talk to a lot of people where they're like, 'I don't see how my story's important,' like, no one thinks their story is important, but....

[00:57:35]

MD: For one thing, there's that kind of scale question, the feeling that I'm just one person. But, also, it just doesn't feel like history yet [laughs]. I do think I have enough perspective to say that my time at Chicago, when I look back on that moment in queer history, I do think it's gonna be a moment of lots and lots of transgender transitions happening in the lesbian community. I was even curious then and I remain curious now, like, if you could catch that wave of people and talk to those same people again in 30 years, how's that gonna look? I would love to get a bigger sweep on how those lives play out and whether all those people who transitioned around the same time, whether their trajectories stayed close or diverged in life. I'm super curious.

KR: It's interesting, too, with oral history, that if you interview someone, like, at one time about the same period and then at another, you get a totally different perspective.

MD: I'm so sure that is true, yeah.

KR: I think that's one of the things that's interesting about doing these histories now and putting them in the archives is that when historians look at it 20 or 30 or 50 years from now, they'll learn a lot about now, even though some of it's about 10, 20, 30 years ago.

[00:58:57]

End of Interview