

“We Referred To It As Coming Out”

Recollections on Trans Identity, State Violence, and 1960s Radicalism

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Published below are excerpts from an extensive oral history interview with Suzan Cooke, a trans woman who was active in Bay Area radical left, feminist, and gay liberation groups in the 1960s and 70s. The original interview is long and recounts much of Cooke's life, from her early years in small-town New York State to her participation in Warhol's Factory scene in New York City to her eventual migration to the Bay Area in the late 60s. Rather than focus on Cooke's life as a whole we have selected portions of the interview that shed light on the experience of coming out and living as a trans woman in the midst of the turbulent and vibrant radical movements of the 1960s, as well as the trauma of dealing with the legal and social criminalization of her gender identity. The excerpts below cover a range of topics: the repressive legal and penal apparatus set in place to police gender and sexuality in 1960s San Francisco; the relationship between trans prostitution and cuts to social services; the complexities of participating as a trans woman in radical feminism and gay liberation movements; and trans- and homophobia in the Weather Underground and SDS. The portion on policing fills in some of the gaps left by the feminist manifestos printed above, describing how trans women experienced the terror of arrest and violence in jail as part of the state's effort to criminalize their nonconformity. Although Cooke does not discuss prostitution very much, she does talk about the fact that street prostitution was the major source of income for most trans women in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco. Connecting the dots, we can conclude that the experience of police harassment and violence in public space due to gender identity and police targeting of trans women as prostitutes were closely linked, and in fact that in the minds of police patrolling the Tenderloin, being trans could be considered synonymous with being a sex worker.

Note: Portions of this oral history have been published in Susan Stryker's *Gay By the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* and Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in America*.

Police Targeting of Queer and Trans People

[In 1967] I got to San Francisco, went directly to the Haight... and I got arrested the first night I was there for obstructing the sidewalk. I was playing guitar with a bunch of people, and the Tac squad, the famous Tac squad that I was going to get to know a great deal better over the next year that I spent in San Francisco, they were like "You're new here. You're going in tonight. We're going to print you."¹ Well this was just sort of standard operating procedure, this checking for runaways. They were picking up and taking in and sending home maybe about 50 runaways a day who were coming into San Francisco, into the Haight... what they would do at that time, they would have a paddy wagon, and they had like two cars, and a driver and two cops would get out and check everybody's IDs... mostly [they] patrolled the Haight, parts of the Fillmore, another group of the Tac squad patrolled the Mission and Hunters Point, and then another branch patrolled the Tenderloin and North Beach... They were like, "Well, we usually don't see your type in the Haight." And later on I sort of figured out what they meant. Because you see I thought I was passing perfectly as this sort of androgynous boy.

¹ The Tac (or Tactical) Squad was formed as a SWAT-type squadron within the SFPD after the Hunters Point riot of 1967. A small mobile unit, it focused on quelling political demonstrations and riots and surveilling and arresting residents of "high crime" areas.

There were a lot of people who were dressing all of a sudden very androgynously. And the cops in San Francisco were not very model in those days. They were some of the worst cops in the country. Worse than the cops in New York City. Worse, in my opinion, than the cops in Los Angeles, which has this horrible monster reputation. But San Francisco cops were the worst. Not only were they mean and vicious, but they were corrupt. You got arrested, and you could expect that if you had twenty dollars then only three of it would turn up in property. That kind of thing. They were pretty much — well, they pretty much had their minds blown away by the whole hippie influx. All of a sudden there were girls with jeans that zipped up the front. There were girls wearing black leather jackets. There were guys in beads with long hair and waist-shirts and Victorian type shirts and bellbottoms with velvet, and some of those kids who became the Cockettes were already running around doing genderfuck drag — and these cops, well, their minds were just gone at this point, already.

[One night] I was coming back from this place, and I was wearing a black leather jacket and boots and jeans and a turtleneck t-shirt. Semi-longish hair... Then the good old Tac squad boys came rolling along. And sometimes they would — well, later they pretty much always would — park a cop car right outside Maud's.² Or near Maud's, as a form of intimidation... They had the cameras out. Because there was still at this time a “let's keep track of the queers” mentality. This was, though, when everything was all stewing up and stirring up and getting ready to boil over. Stonewall did not happen as an incident without lots and lots of development. Anyway, I got stopped, the cops get out of the car, and it's “Hey baby,” something like that, you know?... “Let's see some ID.” “Ok.” “What's this, a draft card? Come on, we know you're coming out of Maud's. Do you really think we're so stupid as to think that you're a boy?” I go, “Well, I am a boy.” And they say, “All right, that's it. You're coming down to the station.” They got me to the station and, under brighter lights, they decided that I probably was a boy. But they still called a matron to search me though I don't think I really got searched much at all. I think maybe they had the matron just do a pat-down... And again I got hauled in for moperly with intent to gawk, obstructing the sidewalk, failure to produce ID, the trivial stuff that they would always charge you with to hold you until the next morning when the judge would kick it out. But this time they added impersonation. And the judge said, “This is what you were wearing?” “Well, judge,” I said, “Yes.” And then he says, “Enough is enough. I've seen enough of you hippies. I'm just sick of this, and I'm going to order a court order, a bench order that this has to stop.”

Now I didn't really get 650.5 off the books, but it meant that cops were going to have to be a lot more accurate in applying it... A lot of the use of 650.5 was just when you were a little too butch or a little too femme. Your clothing was such in 1967 or 68 that you could harass the hippies on it. So you see the counterculture probably inadvertently helped to move 650.5 from being actively enforced.³

They had also been picking up women who wore jeans that zipped up the front because before they zipped up the butt. Up until 1967 women did not wear jeans that zipped up the front. They did not wear pea coats... You were starting to see a lot of stuff in the Haight where the criteria for clothing wasn't which side the buttons were on but whether it looked cool, fit, and was free.

² Maud's was a popular lesbian bar located in Haight-Ashbury.

³ Ordinance 650.5 criminalized the wearing of “excessive” amounts of “opposite sex” apparel, and was routinely used by the SFPD to arrest gender non-conforming people, in particular trans street prostitutes, but also customers at gay and lesbian bars and clubs.

Prostitution and the Welfare State

The major social support for most of the girls in the Tenderloin was prostitution. Or dealing, petty theft, welfare. The programs did help, but as soon as these programs really started helping Nixon was elected in 1968. And one of the first things he did was to start tearing down the war on poverty. He cut out a lot of programs that helped not only trans folks, but a lot of other people at the bottom end of the social spectrum that kept them from, helped them avoid, being criminals. There was just a ripping away of things that had sort of grudgingly been made available not just to trans, but also all sorts of programs... In those days, if you were a tranny prostitute, you were not a call girl. You were a street-walker.

Transitioning in the 60s

While I had been in jail I had made contact with the queens. I got stopped and harassed a few more other times in the process of 1968, and so I had insisted on being thrown into the queen's tank after the rapes, and that's where I started really meeting the queens — who were just transitioning into being trannies, a lot of them, right about this time. I guess the Center for Special Problems had started handing out hormones and the consciousness was there, because in 1966 it had become part of what was going on in America, and wasn't so strange.

Like I said, I had been meeting these queens in the tank, and they were just at that time transitioning from being hair fairies to being trans in the city jail. And all in response to the 1966 announcements.⁴ Because prior to that people were content to be hair fairies, they were content to be drag queens, even if it wasn't a very good life... [By 1969] there was just a lot of street life going on and it was confronting the police, they were losing their grip over the harassment of it all, because people were bringing lawsuits and the like.

Trans Women and Radical Feminism

Well, like I said, here I am, this Berkeley chick, this radical feminist who's coming in getting involved with the gay and lesbian movement, and here they are, saying "If you're transsexual, if you're a real transsexual, then what your goal should be is to get the surgery, if you must work you should work at a traditional woman's job, but that your real goal should be to get married and have a husband, and maybe adopt children, and settle down in suburbia, and never ever ever tell anybody about you."⁵

I just did not interact too well with those people who were into the stereotypical feminine roles because I was in Berkeley, and I was part of this communal thing, and I was part of the radical movement... They were essentially cranking out girls that were learning ten-key, and were learning typing, and learning file clerk, and those sorts of things, and were actually getting their very first jobs through the war on poverty. So I was on welfare, and I didn't really connect

⁴ Probably a reference to Dr. Harry Benjamin's publication in 1966 of *The Transsexual Phenomenon* and formation of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA), which advocated for the recognition of transsexuality as a mental health issue by the medical and psychiatric professions.

⁵ Clark is referring to a group of trans women who worked with SFPD community relations officer Elliot Blackstone to improve relations between the police and trans people. Clark is critical of their attitude toward feminism and their embrace of traditional gender roles.

with this group... Here I am in Berkeley, with feminism, being flooded with Feminism 101, 110, and courses in Advanced Feminism, and they're trying to break me into total femininity, total womanhood. The roles, and the very stereotypical ghettoized sorts of employment. I'm surprised they didn't have me going out applying for hair school — which was, by the way, one of the things that got funded for trannies through the EOC.

...

I had sort of gone — there was also this Gay Women's Liberation — and I had gone to a couple of things. I had been told that I really didn't belong there... On the other hand, while I was told that I didn't belong there by some women who were one part of one group, I was friends with other women who were in the group. So, they said "Here, kid, you're going to need this" — and they handed me *Sexual Politics*, and they handed me *The Second Sex*, and they handed me *Feminine Mystique*, handed me Shulamith Firestone — they handed me all these books and gave me a reading list and said basically read and call us in a year or two.

...

DOB was being inundated with the new lesbians, the lesbian feminists.⁶ If you have read Feinberg's book — at one point Jess goes to a bar, and it's all like these women look all the same, and there's no place for the old time butches, and a femme comes up to her and says "Jess, what's happening? It's all gone."⁷ Well, this is pretty much what was happening. If you were a tranny you got attacked for being too feminine — and if you weren't too feminine you were accused of playing out the male role in the women's community. So you were damned if you did and damned if you didn't... That was a line of thinking that you simply couldn't defeat. There was no point in debating it, you just couldn't win.

And you know trans theory came into direct conflict with feminist theory at that point. Because trans theory said that we were identified as being feminine, or just as being women, because of something within us, not something that we learned. When feminism took over and started saying that it was all learned behavior, that we should be giving our little boys dolls and our little girls — well, not guns, but trucks, because nobody was supposed to have guns — and they will learn to be more similar. And that only works up to an extent. And if it works too well I bet you'll be raising a lot of tranny kids! Which I was going to hope for at the time, but which proved to be too much to hope for.

Gay Liberation

In the fall of 1969 was when they had this first West Coast Gay Liberation Conference in Berkeley, that I had sort of mentioned earlier. It was a real gathering of the tribe. And I had always in my mind made a connection between the trans community and the gay and lesbian community. Not necessarily the same, of course, but queer oppression has always struck me as

⁶ DOB stands for Daughters of Bilitis, often considered the first lesbian rights organization in the United States. Founded in San Francisco in 1955, the group was originally a social club for lesbians. It became more activist-oriented and inflected with feminist politics in the 1960s. Members' views on the inclusion of trans women were divided, and this conflict came to a head when trans member Beth Eliot was ousted in 1969, causing some members to leave the organization.

⁷ This is a reference to a scene from Leslie Feinberg's influential novel *Stone Butch Blues*, a story about a working-class lesbian from Buffalo, New York who becomes involved in the city's lesbian bar culture and later transitions to living as a man.

queer oppression. A lot of times gay people who look really straight and act really straight don't get any of the oppression. It's the too-butcht woman or the butch-femme couple, it's the queens and the trannies that suffer the oppression, and they catch shit more for gender than for who they sleep with... The whole separatism of the gay and lesbian was something that started a little bit later. At first it was all that we were all working together, all queers in the same boat. That was very much a part of the second wave, too.

...

We referred to it as coming out. This was the language of sexual liberation, we didn't use psychspeak — that's what I call it — our language was the language of the queers and queens. One of the first persons to use the newspeak was Virginia Prince.⁸ I mean, she wanted people to... distinguish the heterosexual transvestite from the queen, so she came up with words like "femophilia" and stuff like "cross-dressing" instead of transvestism... The language at that point [in 1969] was the language of the queens. A lot of "Hey, Mary! Hey, girlfriend! What's the T? What's the beads?" That sort of thing... That's part of why I had trouble seeing any vast separation between trans and queens. I mean, to me, queens were just sisters who didn't get whittled on downstairs. God only knows that most of the queens have their own tits and are on hormones so how the hell do you distinguish, really? They didn't play with sharp objects around their genitalia, that's all.

Purged

I got purged from the radical left when SDS transitioned into Weather. All of us were thinking we were very Red Guard, and were only just realizing what utter hell the Red Guards were actually making of China. I got called to a meeting and told that I was very bourgeois for being involved in the feminist movement, and the gay liberation movement, and that anything I was doing as far as being Suzy was a manifestation of bourgeois values, diverting my energies from the revolution. Plus, I was bringing undue attention to myself due to my medical needs, and because I was becoming increasingly unwilling to participate in riots — well, I was simply no longer welcome. The reason I didn't want to participate in riots was basically that I didn't want to get raped, and I was unsure about how I would be treated in jail as a tranny.

I was brought before the cadre... It was already decided when I was told "Come to the meeting, comrade." It was like that — Come to the meeting. Get in the back of the car. There were people on either side of me. I tell you, I was actually kind of scared. I was scared that I was going to be killed... The way that this went down was that I just got fucking denounced. And a few months later I had pretty much disappeared.

⁸ Prince was a transgender activist and one of the first people to use the term transgender. She started *Transvestia* magazine and founded the Society for the Second Self, an organization for what she termed "heterosexual cross-dressers," in 1976.

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