

Interview Summary – Trans Activism Oral History

Interviewee name:	Aaron Devor
Interviewer:	Evan Taylor
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Summary:

Dr. Aaron Devor is a 68-year-old sociologist who has been a professor at the University of Victoria since 1989 and the Chair in Transgender Studies since 2016. He was born in the Bronx, and grew up first in Queens, New York, then in Great Neck, New York. He has been with his wife, Lynn since 1989 and they have 1 son, Lynn's biological son, and 2 grandchildren. Before his transition, he very much identified as a woman, albeit an unusual, gender nonconforming woman. He began his transition and his identity as a man is informed by the gender binary. While non-binary as a concept was not available at the time of his transition, genderqueer was a concept somewhat available, but not something that resonated to Aaron or felt viable at that time. Being Jewish is particularly important to Aaron and he reflects on the ways that Jewish masculinity values intellectualism and how other factors related to gender - such as size - mean that he doesn't stand out among Jewish men as a trans man or as otherwise unusual.

He came out as a butch lesbian quite early in life and so he was involved in early feminist movements as well as early gay rights movements. He was in a raid in a gay bar in New York over the summer of 1969 and this was part of his catalyst to move to Canada. He convinced the registrar to register him last minute and went to school at York University. In 1971, when he moves to downtown, he becomes more involved with feminisms and gay rights, including the Community Homophile Association of Toronto (CHAT), which later became the 519. As part of the women's movement, he was involved with a number of groups that were feminist. He went to trade school to learn about the printing press, worked at a radical left-wing paper called *Guerrilla*, then started a feminist print shop called the Amazon press out of the Women's Centre on DuPont St and published a lesbian feminist newspaper called *The Other Woman*. He remembers living in a shared house that was so well-known as a lesbian house that one time mail arrived with no address, just "The Lesbian House, Toronto" and around the same time, was invited to early meetings of the Body Politic, which he left and wrote them a letter complaining of their sexism. Aaron was a photographer in the 70s and he remembers Rita MacNeil attending women's movement meetings and singing and she used his photos on a songbook. He talks about his work with CHAT and having trans folks in the periphery of that work, as well as doing public education by talking in university classrooms, on the radio, and various other type of public speaking about lesbian issues.

When he moved to Vancouver he was close to a lot of activists, but wasn't doing a lot of that personally, although he recalls an early story about Rape Relief's politics in Vancouver. He went to graduate school at SFU for a BSc in Physics, enjoyed working in a hologram lab, but found he didn't like the program overall and in 1982 decided to write about experiences women who got read as being men, as it had been his experience all his life. Writing the thesis took 4 years and he later turned it into his first book, *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality*. Since he was already thinking he wanted to be a professor based on encouraging comments from his thesis advisor, he decided to enroll in the shortest, quickest PhD program he could find and enrolled in a PhD in Sociology at the University of Washington. Just over 3 years later, he completed his program and was working at the University of Victoria in the Sociology department and the hiring decision was unanimous among the department. He experienced harassment by other department members, including interference with his tenure and promotion, but eventually was promoted up through to the position of Dean of Graduate Studies.

Starting in 87, and until 97 when his next book, *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society*, was published, Aaron was researching and interviewing transsexual men. He was hanging out at a lot of conferences and gatherings with trans men in the 90s and got involved with the IFGE. Aaron didn't follow any standard narrative of trans identity development - over the years he just put less effort into convincing people he was female. He describes his coming out process at with the University of Victoria president's administration and the support and positive experience he had coming out in his workplace. He also had a positive experience in the Jewish community and his wife and other community members organized a ceremony for his transition in Beacon Hill

Park where he walked across a bridge. Shortly afterwards, a journalist contacted him and wanted to do a story for the Globe and Mail about him as the first out trans dean at a major research university, which he agreed to, at the encouragement of his work administration to stay ahead of the story. He got nothing but positive feedback from across the world when the story went public and went big. Aaron talks about handling the differences and balances between being both a trans person and a trans expert in his work, and about his long history of working with WPATH and the Standards of Care. Then, he talks about the inception of the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria and the importance of having credibility in community relationships as so much of the content of the archives has come from people he has known in the community over the years.

Aaron talks about his early ideas of gender 50 years ago as a feminist activist and how he envisioned a world where people could have infinite options for their gender and gender expression and feels we are only just now getting to a place where that is conceivable to people in society. He believes that, without the imposition of cultural norms, gender would be distributed across a normal curve. Another development he sees coming down the pipeline in the coming years is changes to how gender markers and information are collected, used, and displayed on ID and personal records - including health records and anatomical inventories.

He talks about the history of the MTHF conferences and their connection to the Transgender Archives. After being a dean, he was interested in pursuing something like a trans research institute but had to find a way to fundraise for something like this and had very little experience in it. He approached Jennifer Pritzker through her website address multiple times, and then invited her to speak at the MTHF 2014 conference. They spent a few days together before the conference and he showed her around town and had her over for dinner, then a few months later, he visited her and had dinner at her house. A month after that, she called him and offered the \$1M-\$2M to start the Chair in Transgender Studies position. Aaron covers some important aspects of the Transgender Archives in that they are attached permanently to the University library, are free, and publicly available. He describes other aspects of his work with the prison system in changing BC corrections policies on trans inmates, testifying before the Canadian Senate, and addressing the Canadian Chiefs of Police conference. For Aaron, his work now is more about advocacy than it is about activism. He sees activists as people who are outside the walls of power, trying to get a point across, whereas he is able to access a seat at the decision-making table - or at least be heard by those that can.

He describes the Jewish values that he calls on in his work and recalls a family he knew in his childhood that he absorbed some activist values from because they were involved in the labor movement, but there really wasn't anyone to look up to in terms of gay or trans rights and activism yet. He mostly played with the boys growing up and recalls at 4 years old trying to play with the girls as an experiment and being rejected, as well as an incident of harassment on the street when he was 14.

He talks about the limits of language in gender discourses over time and uses the word transsexual as an example of generational differences in discourse. He also talks about gender nonconformity as a risk factor for trans people that he sees likely to continue into the future. Aaron would like to leave the world a better place than he found it and hopes that his writing, his work with the standards of care, and his work establishing and building the Transgender Archives and MTHF conferences will serve a purpose into the future. He wants his grandchildren to learn lessons of justice and reflects on how Jewish cultural values have shaped his life and work.