



Library podcast

Sarah Schulman discusses 'Conflict Is Not Abuse'

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[00:01:54] Our ride. How's everybody doing. I knew you would be my kind of crowd.

[00:02:04] You know when Sarah Schulman says get the show on the road. I think that's a really good idea. So we're getting the show on the road. My name is Davida Ingram. I'm so thrilled to see you here here at the library. We have been thinking about you our public and one of the things that we've been thinking is that we want the Seattle Public Library to be a very democratic space. We want this to be a space that builds community and we want this to be a space where we think about one another as being connected. So if you haven't done so yet please just take this next 30 seconds to say hi to someone in your row that you have not spoken to. All right.

[00:02:47] If you can hear my voice clap one time if you can hear my voice clap two times.

[00:02:54] I hope we stay in Fellowship for the rest of the night and that I don't hit the mike again because my sound guy will be upset.

[00:03:00] Tonight's program is made possible with support from the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Any donors to the Seattle Public Library Foundation or folks who would like to be you all can make some noise. Your generosity makes programs like this possible. I also want to extend Huge things to you our audience for braving that heavy rain. I know Seattle is cliched to talk about rain but it was really ferocious today. So thank you for joining us tonight. And thanks to Elliott Bay Book Company and of course Matilda Bernstein's Sycamore and so Sarah Schulman. Tonight's program is co presented with Seattle ish Seattle Review of Books Gay City Arts to us.

[00:03:48] Voices for Peace Seattle and Elliott Bay I think the really fun thing that I get to do is introduce Matilda and then Matilda is gonna give us run of show and I have to say Matilda is such a catch.

[00:04:04] I'm so glad you're in Seattle. I'm sad that San Francisco is so gentrified and so excited that you decided to make Seattle your home.

[00:04:13] You're making the life of this city one where we think about being inclusive in ways that are really bold and brilliant. And I admire you Matilda Bernstein's *Sycamore* is the author of a memoir and two novels and the editor of five non-fiction anthologies her latest titled *The End of San Francisco* won a Lambda Literary Award and her most recent anthology. Why are faggots so afraid of faggots.

[00:04:39] Flaming challenges to masculinity. I do agree flaming challenges of masculinity is something we should do. Objectification and the desire to conform was an American Library Association Stonewall Honor Book.

[00:04:50] She recently finished third novel *Sketchasy* which sounds very exciting and is the host of contagious exchanges.

[00:05:01] Queer writers in conversation, a monthly reading you need to go check out that series that is really from a monthly reading series a Hugo House on First Wednesday so please join me in welcoming Matilda Bernstein's *Sycamore*.

[00:05:20] Thank you David. Thanks so much to everyone at the library. And thanks already to this fantastic audio. I always like to start by saying anything you need to do to take care of yourselves. Please do it if you need to get up and walk around. You need to stretch if you need to laugh if you need to cry if you need to run out the door. Go to the bathroom if you need to buy a book. Anything you need to do. The only bad audience is the dead audience and I can tell this is not going to be a dead audience. Also since we are in one of the world's oldest Queer cruising spaces. If anyone looking for a dates. Please raise your hand. Look around I want to hear stories about some good dates coming out of this event player.

[00:06:23] I first became aware of Sarah Solomon's work shortly after I'd escaped childhood and everything I was supposed to be in order to find and define myself as a queer, an activist, and an insult survivor. In the early 90s San Francisco at age 19 I joined a local chapter of ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power and all those. I love the applause everywhere bring it on. And although there I was across the country in New York. She was already a legend for activism and ACT UP and elsewhere. She had already published five novels that had established her as a renowned writer and a lesbian icon. I was at ACT UP and there I heard about a book that she was about to release called *my American history* a collection of Sara's reporting from the Reagan Bush years when I'd grown up. Even the title of the book tells us about Sarah's agenda to refuse the silencing of officialdom to create our own culture and to throw ourselves into the rack of history so that we can rescue a hint of truth. I first met Sara a decade later when I was in New York on tour for one of my anthologies. That's revolting which includes a brilliant conversation between Sarah and Jim Hubbard. She invited me to her East Village apartment and there we talked for several hours.

[00:08:09] I was surprised to find that she was as interested in me as I was in her. She had no desire to establish a distance based on experience. She wanted to communicate and she wanted to learn.

[00:08:29] These are Sarah's hallmarks.

[00:08:33] Sarah Schulman is not interested in conventional wisdom except perhaps to challenge it. In her novels

[00:08:45] there's usually a character who can tell the difference between right and wrong and is punished for it.

[00:08:52] Maybe this character is a stand in for Sarah or maybe this character is a stand in for us.

[00:09:04] Sarah is always writing because she's always thinking and she's always thinking because she's always creating. In the last seven years she's published six new books, two novels. That's right. The Mirror future and The Cosmopolitans and four non-fiction titles Ties that bind: Familial Homophobia and its Consequences. The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination, Israel Palestine and the Queer Imagination and the Queer International rather and her new book Conflict is Not Abuse. Each book builds upon the analysis of the others offering us the body of work that's more like an actual body than just a pile of paper. By this I mean that Sarah's work breathes its form shifts with the topic at hand and it's sometimes elegant and it's sometimes messy just like there are the wards include a Kasler Award for Sustained contribution to LGBT studies a Guggenheim Fellowship a Fulbright fellowship and two American Library Association book awards. She's a distinguished professor of English at City University of New York. But this doesn't mean that she's no longer distinguishing. There are Simone's latest book conflict is not abuse. Like most of her work is an activist intervention. It is bold it asks us to be bold. It does not seek to make us comfortable of comfort and enables inaction. The cover of the book may of Vogue as soothing self help tap. But this book in Sarah's words is the opposite of self-help I would say that it's about reimagining communal care and what could be a better time to talk about how we can support one another to challenge the violence of the status quo in our personal lives, our intimate relationships and our interactions with the structures of power. This is Sarah Schulman's 18th book and I believe her first reading in Seattle in 18 years.

[00:11:45] It's about time, please welcome Sarah Schulman. Ok so bring it down a lot because I'm just a nerdy intellectual.

[00:12:08] First of all let's be happy that Chelsea Manning is getting out of prison. Which may be the last good news we ever have. Thank you.

[00:12:24] You know unfortunately I think my book has actually been proven by the election because we have this person Donald Trump who is every day telling us what a victim he is especially when people tell the truth about him and he is constantly saying that he's being victimized by that at the same time he's managed to manipulate and actually oppressed group of people working class and poor white people into believing that the people who are hurting them are people who have even less

power than they do. Immigrants instead of identifying the White 1 percent who have globalized their jobs and through manipulating their racist identification with other white people instead of the class identification that they should be having with other people who are in their same position we have we've seen this kind of scapegoating and this projection of anxiety that I think is very central to our our political lives right now. So I'm going to read a little bit from the book and then I'm going to talk a little bit and then we can talk together and of course I'm sure you'll disagree with quite a bit of it because you know some of the ideas are a little wonky but some of them are good and I just have a little me a little thing at the beginning that I want to read to you.

[00:13:39] This is not a book to be agreed with an exhibition of evidence nor a display of proof. It is instead designed for engage in dynamic interactive collective thinking where some ideas will resonate. Others will be rejected and still others will provoke the readers to produce new knowledge themselves like authentic conscious relationships truly progressive communities responsible citizenship and real friendship. And like the peacemaking that all these require it asks you to be interactive so I start with a quote from James Baldwin not everything that is faced can be changed but nothing can be changed until it is faced. As I began this book during the summer of 2014 the human community witnessed systemic repetition of unjustified cruelty with exhaustion and frustration. We watched white police officers in Ferguson Missouri and Staten Island New York murder two unarmed black men Michael Brown and Eric Garner.

[00:14:50] We watched a rich and powerful professional football player Ray Rice beat his wife Janay unconscious in an elevator. We watched the Israeli government mass murder over two thousand Palestinian civilians in Gaza. It quickly became apparent that the methods we've developed collectively to date to understand these kinds of actions in order to avoid them are not adequate. Now as a novelist in order to create characters that have integrity I apply the principle that people do things for reasons even if they are not aware of those reasons or even if they cannot accept that their actions are motivated instead of neutral and objective. Using this principle to examine those events I have to ask myself what the White police officers the wealthy football player and the militarized nation state think is happening that produces and justifies their brutal actions. As video and witness accounts attest. Neither Michael Brown nor Eric Garner did anything that justified the way they were treated by the police. Eric Garner's sold loose cigarettes and Michael Brown walked down the street. Both men tried to offer the police alternatives to cruelty. Eric Garner inform the police of the consequences of their actions on him when he told them 11 times while in an illegal chokehold I can't breathe. Michael Brown raised his hands in a sign of surrender and said don't shoot but something occurred within the mind's impulses and group identities of the white police officers in that they construed the original non-event compounded with these factual and peacemaking communications as some kind of threat

[00:16:43] or attack. In other words these policemen looked at nothing. The complete absence of threat and there they saw threat gross enough to justify murder. Nothing happened with these people with power saw abuse we know from security camera footage taken in a casino lobby an elevator that Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice and his wife were having a quarrel. Now as much as we don't like quarrels with our partners and wish they would not happen. Disagreement with one's lover

is a normative part of human experience. It is impossible to live without it ever taking place. Intimate disagreement is as they say life. Yet Ray Rice experienced normative regular conflict that exists in every relationship family and household in the world as so overwhelmingly unbearable and threatening that he hit his wife knocking her unconscious and dragged her limp body by the ankles out of the elevator leaving her lying and nerd in a hallway. He looked at normative everyday conflict and responded with extreme cruelty. He looked at the regular even banal expression of difference and he saw threat. The Israeli government has kept the Palestinian Gaza Strip under siege since 2005. This is made daily life unbearable for its inhabitants. In the late spring of 2014 the government of Benjamin Netanyahu escalated pressure on the already suffering Palestinians and some factions within Gaza responded with rockets. There were of such poor quality. They had only symbolic impact. The Israeli government reacted and turned to this response with over 50 days of aerial bombing and ground invasion causing mass death and massive destruction of literal, cultural and psychological infrastructure. The Gazans were reacting to a state of injustice that the Israelis had created. The Gazans were resisting. They were refusing to go along with unbearable and unjustifiable treatment. The Israelis experienced this resistance to ongoing unfair treatment as

[00:19:04] attack. Brown and Garner did absolutely nothing but be black. Janay Rice expressed normative conflict. Gazans resisted unbearable treatment in all of these cases the police, the husband, and the nation overstated harm. They took nothing normative conflict and resistance and misrepresented these reasonable stances of difference as abuse. From the most intimate relationship between two people to the power of the police to the crushing reality of occupation. These actors displayed distorted thinking in which justifiable behavior was understood as aggression in this way they overreacted at a level that produced tragedy pain and division. It is this moment of overreaction that I wish to examine my thesis is that at many levels of human interaction there is the opportunity to conflate, discomfort with threat, to mistake internal anxiety for exterior danger and in turn it to escalate rather than resolve. I will show how this dynamic whether between two individuals between groups of people between governments and civilians or between nations is a fundamental opportunity for either tragedy or peace. Conscious awareness of these political and emotional mechanisms gives us all a chance to face ourselves to achieve recognition and understanding in order to avoid escalation towards unnecessary pain however it is not only the police, wealthy football players or colonial occupiers who can feel abused in the absence of actual threat.

[00:21:02] It is not only the dominant who feel endangered when faced with normative conflict or when their own unjust actions are responded to with resistance.

[00:21:12] In fact these distorted reactions occur in both the powerful and the weak the supremacist and the traumatized in society and in intimacy in arenas in which real abuse could conceivably take place. There are those who feel persecuted and threatened even though they are not in danger and they often lack help from those around them to differentiate between the possible and the actual bullies often conceptualize themselves as being under attack when they are the ones originating the pain. Everywhere we look there is confusion between conflict and abuse if a person cannot solve a conflict with a friend how can they possibly contribute to larger efforts for peace. If we refuse to speak to a friend because we project our anxieties onto an email they wrote how are we going to welcome

refugees immigrants and the homeless into our communities? The values required for social repair are the same values required for personal repair. And so this discussion must begin in the most micro experience confusing being mortal with being threatened. Can occur in any realm the fact that something could go wrong does not mean that we are in danger.

[00:22:39] It means that we are alive. Now on a freezing snowy day in 2014. I was invited to a workshop run by a social worker named Catherine Hodes, a native New Yorker in her 50s. Hodes is an experienced professional with over 20 years of development and leadership in what was once called the battered women's movement that's now known as intimate relationship abuse advocacy. Now intimate abuse is a real crisis for New York. The New York Times reported that the police received two hundred and eighty four thousand intimate abuse calls a year which is about eight hundred a day and make forty six thousand intimate abuse arrests every year. Hodes had boldly started to notice that clients were increasingly confused about what the word abuse actually means that it was overused. The paradox is of course that many women are unable to recognize that they are being abused or many women cannot get acknowledgement of this reality from others. But at the very same time Hodes also found that some women were also applying the term abuse to situations that were really something else. Increasingly she noticed that women who did not know how to resolve a problem sometimes describe that feeling with the word abuse. So this session had been convened to address that trend directly with service providers. Hodes focus was to help social workers differentiate between abuse and conflict so that they could be effective and directed in helping clients in ways that would speak to their real experiences while identifying abuse is essential to saving lives and providing services.

[00:24:34] Differentiating conflict from abuse is also essential to meeting clients real need to learn how to face and deal with obstacles and to develop truthful assessments of themselves and others. Quote: differentiating between power struggle and power over Hodes explained is the difference between conflict and abuse. Abuse is power over and conflict is power struggle.

[00:25:06] As we students discussed and grappled with this insight over the course of the day my understanding consistently deepened. While obviously abuse takes place in life every day where one person is being controlled by another or by a group in a manner that they have not contributed to and cannot change the word abuse has also become overused. People may feel angry, frustrated, upset but this does not mean that we are being abused. We could instead be in conflict.

[00:25:39] Therefore the fact that one person is suffering does not inherently mean that the other party is to blame people may not know how to make things better how to look at their own participation how to deal with feeling badly about themselves they may not know how to understand their own actions and are afraid of the implications of their actions on the meaning of their lives. And this may be devastating tormenting and painful but this is not being abused. It does not get resolved by organizing the punishment of another person. People may be part of negative friendships families or communities who attack outsiders instead of being self-critical. They may be receiving encouragement to blame and scapegoat others. They may live within groups relationships or families that do not tolerate the admission of mistakes and they reinforce supremacy ideologies about each

other in order to maintain illusions of righteousness. This pressure resulting in the action of collectively deflecting blame does not mean that the person being blamed is abusive. In fact it does nothing at all about that person except that they are being blamed. Ok.

[00:27:07] Just want to say a few other things.

[00:27:11] Before Matilda and I start talking. Matilda and I talk all the time on the phone, for hours.

[00:27:16] Seriously. serious like you helped me write this book. Oh ok.

[00:27:23] I'm not one of the interesting things that Hodes pointed to in this workshop was that increasingly perpetrators increasingly are the ones to initiate calling the police threatening legal action sending lawyer letters or threatening or seeking restraining orders as part and parcel of their agenda of blame and unilateral control. And the National Coalition of antiviolence programs a recent report on LGBTQ intimate partner abuse noted that in 2013 the police miss arrested the survivor as the perpetrator of violence and over half of all queer domestic abuse arrests misidentifying the perpetrator and same sex relationships as the one who is butch of color, not a mother, not a citizen from another culture or HIV positives. Now one of Hodes is many valuable suggestions is to lower the bar for what must happen in a person's life for their suffering to be acknowledged. Quote: The current paradigm is encouraging all of us to think we are in abusive relationships. Hodes explained that if you are not in an abusive relationship you don't deserve help. Being abused is what makes you eligible but everyone deserves help when they reach out for it. This is a strikingly humane idea that the collapse of conflict and abuse is partly the result of a punitive standard in which people are being desperate yet ineligible for compassion. This is a non cynical reading of a human condition in which people who have suffered in the past or find ourselves implicated in situations in which we are afraid to be accountable. Fear that within our group acknowledging some responsibility will mean being denied then our need to be heard and cared for. So we fall back on the accusation of abuse to guarantee that we will not be questioned in a way that confirms these fears especially vulnerable to this or those of us who experienced profound disapproval and criticism early on as children who are later locked into self-righteous families or supremacy communities with negative bonds.

[00:29:43] Ultimately the blurring of conflict and abuse hope says is epidemic and leads to everyone identifying as a victim which is paralyzing the search for solutions. Now I was moved and enlightened by her insight that conflicted people have to prove that they are eligible for compassion. No one can negotiate without being heard shunning and therefore is designed to maintain a unilateral position of unmovable superiority by asserting one's status as abused at the implied consequential right to punish without terms. This concept of having to earn the right to have painting knowledge is predicated on a need to enforce that one party is entirely righteous and without mistake while the other is the spectre the residual holder of all evil. If instead conflicted people were expected and encouraged by their groups to produce complex understandings of their relationships then people could be expected to negotiate instead of having to justify their pain through inflated charges of victimization. Now I of course was very interested to try to understand how we got to this point. I'm just going to summarize a little bit from the next chapter here. But just to give some history so I was

born in 1958 in New York City and in 1958 if a woman was raped. Your testimony alone was not enough to get a conviction you had to have a witness.

[00:31:11] This is the truth. To get a conviction.

[00:31:13] So in the 60s when the feminist movement against violence emerged that was the context it was a completely horrible context for women and this movement emerged in a time when there were many radical movements all over the world that were really reimagining every way that people relate to each other every kind of structure even the question of the nation itself was it with that on the table. So when you read the documents of the early feminist movement against violence and against male violence you see that they attribute male violence against women and children to patriarchy poverty and racism and their early their discourse was very much focused on empowering women not so much on punishing men.

[00:31:59] Interestingly so they developed a lot of grassroots services: rape hotlines, self-defense classes, battered women's shelters this sort of thing. And in the 70s there was a program called Seta where staff of community based grassroots organizations could get funding from the federal government. Now when Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 which is D-Day for the troubles we're having now. What something that he did in the first three weeks in office was eliminated Seta. Right. So all these services started to flounder. And through the 80s you see them getting becoming integrated into the state. You see the government taking over these services you see people being professionalized and then being accredited. And this of course creates a crisis of meaning because the U.S. government is one of the greatest sources of violence in the world. And to have you know so to have the people who cause violence to be in charge of ending violence I assure you they were not looking at patriarchy, poverty and racism. They were upholding patriarchy, poverty and racism. They were looking for who to punish so you start to see a whole layer of laws evolve which are focused on which gives the state a lot of access into especially poor families and poor communities and gives the state the power to punish i.e.

[00:33:19] incarcerate. Now interestingly in the 80s there was a lot of cultural propaganda for this concept things like Law and Order Special Victims Unit emerges in this period. And if you look at those early TV shows they're all about how there's an evil perpetrator and there's a completely innocent pure clean victim. And the answer is the police. So you start to develop this concept that the appropriate arbiter of relationships are the police. Now just to say that there's a lot of reasons to not rely on the police and most of us here know meant what many of them are. But one thing that's very interesting is that in terms of profession in the United States a police officer is the profession with the highest rate of domestic violence of any other profession including the National Football League field players. So in this way you know I think the the the question of addressing the sources of violence have become removed and have been replaced in a manner where we give up community, accountability and this enhances the power of the state. And then I give two examples in the book that we're sure we'll discuss but that I think are really perfect case studies of the structure one is HIV criminalization which is a global trend in which people who are HIV positive are required by law to

disclose to sexual partners even if they're virally suppressed and they're not infectious even if they use a condom.

[00:34:51] My prime example is Canada which has one of the worst HIV criminalization laws in the world. Interestingly. There's currently 250 people in prison in Canada for not disclosing their status even if their partner was not infected. So in that case you could see that a person's anxiety about sexuality or their anxiety about the that AIDS stigma by advocating that responsibility they enhance the power of the state by creating a new class of people HIV negative people who now have the power to incarcerate a whole new class of people HIV positive people. And who benefits from this the state apparatus and you know and I have a very long discussion of that event. And then the final chapter is on the 2014 Israeli massacre of Gaza. And if you examine Israeli rhetoric Israeli state rhetoric it's filled with abuse tropes. They're constantly describing themselves as threatened, attacked endangered and all of this when they are the perpetrators you know the people who they're describing as as dangerous are actually endangered themselves. And this is we get back to this is this is exactly the paradigm that Donald Trump is using.

[00:36:07] So in conclusion my argument is that when we abdicate our own role our own projections of anxieties and our own participation in creating conflict we enhance the power of the state. Ok.

[00:36:21] Thank you very much.

[00:36:32] So Sarah, one of the things you brought up in your intro the quote you said is if a person cannot solve a conflict with a friend how can they possibly contribute to larger efforts for peace. And yet it often seems like social justice work requires dysfunction. Right and sometimes the dysfunction is caused by the structures of power that are allied against us but often it feels like it's caused by the methods of organizing themselves. And I wonder if you think this is one of the reasons that structural change rarely happens.

[00:37:15] I don't know. I don't see it that way.

[00:37:17] You know I'm a historian of ACT UP, Jim Hubbard and I founded the ACT UP Oral History Project. And you can look at our it's an act up oral history dot org. If you want to go to it we've interviewed or I've interviewed one hundred and eighty seven former members of ACT UP OVER 16 YEARS and it's a pretty good history of that movement. And you know one of the questions that we're always trying to answer is why was ACT UP effective.

[00:37:42] Because really it was even though I know AIDS is still here and AIDS is not over but ACT UP is one of the most effective recent social movements in the United States. One of the reasons that they were effective is because they did not work on a consensus basis and people were allowed to have simultaneity of it of action. So for example if you wanted to do something and I didn't want to do it I wouldn't stop you from doing it I just wouldn't do it. You know and that is an effect that is effective because people can only be where they're at. Right. So if your whole job is to change the person mind in your group to want to do your strategy, you've already failed.

[00:38:26] It's an old left model.

[00:38:29] It's a Leninist concept you know of democratic centralism. That's really what it is when there used to be the central committee would decide everything of the Communist Party and then they would tell you what the line was and you were supposed to repeat the line. Well that didn't go very well did it. And it hasn't worked for us. So you know I think there's a lot of dysfunction but it makes us not be effective at dysfunction. And one of the central pieces is not tolerating difference. I mean there is no correct line. There just isn't. You know and of course there's some people that you don't share enough values with to really want to work with them intimately so don't work with them. But you know you're saying that decentralized model is what helped it to succeed simultaneity of action like lots of different strategies at the same time because the only way things move forward in the United States is through coalition and coalition means difference and difference means people are going to have different approaches in different places that they want to focus and different kinds of tactics and strategies that they want to use.

[00:39:32] So that's very important right there. Another thing is don't do stuff that doesn't work. I know this sounds dumb but you know. When you look at left wing organizing people are constantly doing things the same way over and over and over that have never ever worked you know.

[00:39:48] So an example is like getting a lot of people to stand outside in the cold with signs and listen to speakers. I mean I don't think that that's out effective. For example. But I mean if it makes you feel better you should do it. But you know.

[00:40:07] But if you look at what has been effective for you know it was interesting because many years later I was teaching Letter From Birmingham Jail by Martin Luther King to my students and I realized that Dr. King had the exact same strategy as ACT UP. But no one had ever realized that when we were fact that the strategy was that you become the expert on your issue so you really deeply understand it better than anybody else. Therefore you propose and design the solution instead of being an infantilized relationship to power where you're begging them to solve it. You designed the solution and you present the solution which has to be reasonable winnable and doable. Right. To the powers that be and when they say no. Then you use I prefer nonviolent civil disobedience to communicate to the population through the media not to the media to force them to.

[00:41:08] To accept your program an example of this is and I'll give you two examples one from ACT UP which was when we designed something called parallel track which is a way to get experimental drugs to people who wanted them and presented the design to the Food and Drug Administration. And when they said no we shut the building down. And then they said yes. You know if you look at Dr. King's strategies and not just his him personally but that whole movement is a very interesting action of course is sit ins at segregated lunch counters. Now we've all seen that footage right. But what they're really doing there is they're not marching in front of the building with a sign saying. Please integrate your lunch counter. They're actually integrating the lunch counter.

[00:41:56] The action is to actually create the vision and to make it real and to make the state stop you instead of stopping yourself.

[00:42:06] So those are those are tactics that have been successful historically.

[00:42:10] I mean you talk about also you know sort of the here you're talking about sort of how people in act out who were outside of the structures of power in a way became insiders. And I think there's a parallel in the book where you're talking about how gay rights in general produces new insiders. And it also produces new outsiders the sort of the reverse in a sense. And I think you know in some ways directly speaking to HIV advocacy and activism you know the HIV criminalization you're talking about in some ways is produced by creating a new insider. Right. Which are people who are HIV negative whereas people who are HIV positive are outside.

[00:42:55] And I think in a way we can even see this in kind of the rhetoric of HIV prevention. You know here in Washington State we have this initiative called End AIDS Washington and they talk about four steps to ending AIDS right. And the fourth steps are get insured, get tested and get prep and get treatment right. So condoms don't matter anymore and neither does a cure. Right. And so if a cure doesn't matter who is being censored in HIV advocacy and I wondered if you if you had something to say about this sort of do you think that belies the prejudice against HIV positive people that talking about a cure is no longer on the table. We can talk about Prep which is you know pre exposure prophylaxis which is taking Truvada you know in order to prevent HIV infection. We can talk about treatment as prevention which is you know taking drugs to suppress viral load so other people don't get infected but we can't talk about a cure. And the only way to end AIDS is with a cure. Last time I checked

[00:44:05] You just brought up like seven major subjects.

[00:44:08] So let me just try to remember some of the real most important points here. So the first question was about I think insiders when this was ACT UP downfall actually and why ACT UP fell apart is really important historic question because at the beginning everybody was equal there were no treatments. It didn't matter if you were a Wall Street broker or if you were a homeless person you were going to die. And so the AIDS Coalition was an enormous coalition. I mean it was so broad if you Gemma Hubbard directed a film that he and I co-produced called united in anger. And you can get it on iTunes and it shows you that it was the group. It's the it's the breath of the coalition is what made the AIDS paradigm transform.

[00:44:54] But once there started to be some treatments and we had insiders and outsiders because we had the people who could access the treatments and the people who couldn't. And that's when active started to fall apart over the issue of access which leads us to the second question which is why are people who are HIV positive treated so terribly. I mean it is AIDS. Stigma is a fascinating phenomena because frankly if you have insurance or if you live in Canada if you have access to the standard of care it's not the worst thing that can happen to you to get HIV infected. There's a lot of diseases that are a lot worse than HIV but the stigma around HIV never goes away and the stigma is

what are the greatest obstacles to people with HIV. And I think it's because it's still associated with anal sex in people's minds it's HIV is still queered in people's minds and that's where I think why they think the stigma never ends and then oh Prep. Well you know the whole prep thing is so fascinating. Ian Salt Bradley-Perrin who is a very interesting young AIDS activist noted that he surveyed one year of New York Times coverage of HIV and found that over 70 percent of the coverage was about prep so obviously some pharmaceutical company is doing a lot of lobbying back there and they have their great name Gilliard do you know the people make prep recalled Gilliard. Anyway the thing with prep is that

[00:46:26] if we right now only one third of people who are HIV positive in America have the standard of care because we don't have health care and it's only going to get worse. Next week but if everyone had health care then so many more people would not be infectious so then the need for Prep would be diminished but then the profit margin for Gilliard would also be diminished so prep is something that you can sell to everybody as long as no people don't have health care. It's very sinister actually. I am not against Prep. Go for it but I'm I'm looking at the larger structure because you know as AIDS activism was able in a way to overcome HIV but not capitalism.

[00:47:17] And that's that's been our obstacle too easy.

[00:47:22] I'd like in the book how you give these very personal and also practical and touching you know stories of people who were both yourself and other people who overcame you know sort of big obstacles in very simple ways and one of the one of the anecdotes you give is about a friend of yours Matt Bram who tested positive after unprotected sex with a partner who didn't know he was positive and instead of you know shaming or persecuting the partner he called them up and told him and he helped him to make an appointment to get tested and then went with him to get tested. I mean I thought that even though it's a very simple gesture. Something like that is so rare. I mean it made me cry like you know literally and and you ask a very simple question in response you say you know I mean HIV has been criminalized since the beginning. Right. That's been state policy all along. And you say well why couldn't this be state policy. Right.

[00:48:28] Why shouldn't why not. Why isn't it mandatory that negatives disclose.

[00:48:32] So I think another thing that I found really refreshing about the book is you have a very good joke by the way that I don't believe that this should be mandatory.

[00:48:44] You never know because you say things and the next thing you know they're on Tumblr or something and it's all over, the story. Mandatory make out session right now.

[00:48:55] Speaking of making out I think you have a very strong critique of the nuclear family in the book and you sort of talk about how the family is an incubator of hypocrisy. Right. And apocracy, oppression and bigotry are sort of the central hallmarks of the nuclear family. And and you go further and talk about this new emergence of something else called the queer family which sort of mimics the same structure that the nuclear family. And you know so you say that these sort of nontraditional

families may be you know setting them up themselves up to be just as much intertwined with this state as there. You know assimilation brings new privileges. And in that way I think you're saying that the focus on the family and queer worlds may be just as detrimental as that in straight worlds.

[00:49:57] Well I'm noticing is that you know after the Civil War there was this period called white reconciliation in the north and the south got back together and they realized that if they need it we're going to maintain white supremacy they're going to have to cooperate with each other. Right. So they started having these events like barbecues for veterans of the confederacy in the union to get together and socialize. And in some ways the whole gay family thing has been an action of white reconciliation because you know familial homophobia I wrote a book about it it's called ties that bind familial homophobia and its consequences. And I think I coined the phrase familial homophobia because even though it's something that most gay people have experienced or queer people have experienced it didn't even have a name. Everyone just called it it. But anyway. You know with familial homophobia a lot of queer people were driven out of whiteness.

[00:50:52] I mean they still had white privilege and still carried racism but we're driven out of the white family structure and white normativity and into the queer community. There was still a racist community but there was a separation there. With with gay marriage, same sex marriage and parenthood. There's a often there's a reconciliation with the white family. You know once you have that kid than your parents like ok you're a lesbian but you have children you know and especially for. my generation of women where being a female was bad enough.

[00:51:26] I mean I grew up where you know I had to you know I'm so humiliated even say this I can barely get it out. But I had to clear my brother's plate you know that kind of thing I grew up like that. And then by the time you're a lesbian and you know you're just a total disappointment to the family and you're a mess and they don't have anything to do with you. But then you have a child and suddenly you're finally doing something right. You know especially if your relationship falls apart. Well you have one good thing your mother you know and then you're back into whiteness. So now what we're seeing is that. Even though at one point all queer people lived in illegality because I'm sure you know that sodomy was illegal until 2003 Supreme Court the United States overturned those laws in 2003.

[00:52:15] But where was I going with that so. Oh yes. So now that we have you know white now we have gay people re-entering into whiteness and white privilege and white supremacy and we're seeing white gay people participating in racist movements around the world and in anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim movements in Europe.

[00:52:41] Countries with the most gay rights have the highest gay participation and right wing and fascist movements like the Netherlands and this kind of thing.

[00:52:48] It's all been restructured now so there's a new abject object there's a new queer and that is the undocumented queer the trans people people of color poor people you know but the white gay person who is not in those categories is assimilated into the power structure in lots of ways. So you

know that's that's what I'm seeing. And the other thing is I'm concerned you know all studies show that queer families have less violence against children than straight families. So the queer family is turned out to be a really good thing for children. But I'm not so sure that it's so great for the mothers because I would add one thing that I feel is that in a way the mother role has not changed that much and that it's still a role of martyrdom and guilt and the mother it's still compensatory motherhood that the mother is responsible not only for compensating in the child's life for all the pain of the world but also for compensating for the repression that she experienced. She's also trying to re-parent herself in some ways I'm talking about my generation now and that's a very heavy burden all of that.

[00:53:54] So you know it's the mothers I'm worried about I think another thing you sort of mentioned about that kind of white reconciliation is you know the way it takes resources out of queer oppositional worlds and brings them back you know to the sort of family of origin and also sort of makes demands in a way or diminish as the queer relationships that were previously central.

[00:54:25] Well it does break down the community relationship. You know if we had been in privatized family units when the AIDS crisis started we would not have been able to overcome the AIDS crisis it was because we had a community based relationship that we were able to build that movement you know because of the way the privatized family is constructed is that in this country where there's no support for parenting right. That it's such an energy drain that it's so much harder to participate in social and not for everybody. Many people can do it but it's much harder if you don't have a community based relationship

[00:55:00] to overturn paradigm. Speaking of resources I think one of the things I think is a bit surprising in the book is sort of you know I think a lot of us look to Canada as a place where health care is readily accessible, where funding for the Arts actually exists. And I think by your sort of analysis of Canada the book has more I think of a dystopia in a sense in which individuals become embedded with the state and therefore there isn't as much critique of the institutions of power. And specifically you're talking about HIV criminalization which in Canada's nationalised here it's state by state and. But I think you also sort of talked to this this idea of almost like a mob mentality in the sense of the ways in which people become sort of part of the state in their analysis. You know in their private lives not just in their you know looking for basic resources.

[00:56:20] Well in all you know in the Canadian example if you look at Canada through the lens of HIV which is it's how I'm looking at it you say these are some people who don't say sorry enough let's put it that way.

[00:56:32] You know I because there's a neo-liberal facade but it's a brutal law.

[00:56:38] And when I examined this began as an article I wrote for Slate magazine as a journalist and I expanded it when I started to develop this this understanding. But when you look at the origins of HIV criminalization in Canada well you look at who's first thinking that a journalist would look at is who are these people who are sitting in jail. And you find out half of them are black. Now there's very

few black people in Canada. It's two point six percent black. So why are half of the people in jail for HIV criminalization black?

[00:57:06] And then I start to unravel it and you can see that it really came to be as an anti-immigrant measure and that there was a lot of stuff and you know scary stuff in the press about African immigrants and that that propaganda was used to convince the population of these these policies.

[00:57:28] One of the things you do in the book I think you take a lot of really complicated dynamics and you simplify them into very direct statements that seem like completely logical but in a way are counterintuitive I think to most people.

[00:57:43] You know for example you gave one in your intro you said the fact that something could go wrong does it not mean that we are in danger. It means that we're alive right and I think a lot of people think the fact that something could go wrong means you know we need fences, we need security, we need more cops, we need border police, etc. etc. And a couple other ones that you use you say are more about you know interpersonal relations and you say no one is obligated to obey a unidirectional order that has not been discussed. And I think you know we're often told that if someone says to do something then we have to do what they say. Right. And a lot of different situations. Another one you give is an apology that doesn't allow the other person to talk is not actually an apology. Right. And I think we're told that if someone just says I'm sorry. You know that's the end right. And the last one or one last example I mean there are dozens of these. But as you say the telling of the truth and I think you said this in your intro is considered far worse than the unmentionable truth itself. And so I wondered if you could talk a little bit about how you developed a methodology that allowed you to simplify both to tell anecdotal stories but also to simplify you know people write entire books about each of these individual things and to simplify them into very accessible statements that are hard to disagree with even if they go against the grain of what is generally considered conventional wisdom.

[00:59:20] Well I'm not an academic so I can't prove any of these things.

[00:59:25] So that frees me to just try out ideas and you know the readers have permission to disagree which they do. I mean it would be impossible to agree with everything in this book. It would be impossible. So it is start from that. It has something to do with Jewish being Jewish. What is it?

[00:59:46] I don't know.

[00:59:51] Like I'm a storyteller I guess. Um I think that's where the anecdotal basis comes from and maybe we should we open it up to the audience a little. Do I do it. So can you answer the questions or just simply to raise your hands. There are runners people will be coming to you with mikes um and we're ready.

[01:00:13] So people are gonna run to anyone with their hand up or if you if a hand is a difficult thing to do just yell and say I've got a question. You know what I mean. Anything. We're gonna start from

the back. We're gonna be a little unconventional and how we do things. It's not just the most visible people I've got to ask the because.

[01:00:34] Keep in mind that a lot of people want to ask questions so please try to make your questions as succinct as possible and bring them on high.

[01:00:47] This is awesome. Thank you. I've been thinking about when you started talking about. I'm sure you're familiar with Katie Roiphe.

[01:00:54] book *The Morning After* and the politics that surrounds the college women's movement around sexual trauma assault which is like by definition sorry I'm getting a lot of reverb. A movement that is about like white cis hetero women that encourages women to aid in her thesis is women are encouraged to identify themselves as victims in order to access power movements around dismantling sexual assault structures. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the difference between ACT UP which is a movement around rage vs Take Back the Night which is a movement around trauma and how those two things are perpetuating different places for people to access change. I haven't read that book I'm a little suspicious of her.

[01:01:52] So I don't. I'm not totally familiar with that argument but I can

[01:02:04] says victims of sexual assault in order to access the power to dismantle sexual assault and rape culture. So so she says things like the stat around 1 in three women are sexually assaulted that the data metrics behind those ask us to identify behaviors as being traumatic when they're asked Why don't you say what you think about that because I don't know what do I think.

[01:02:43] I think that women are perpetually encouraged to identify themselves as being asking for power to be infantilized by power structures and that is our access to retribution and that that isn't necessarily the best way for us to say that we live in a rape culture ask us to identify ourselves as rape victims when you don't need necessarily to do that in order to have cause to have problems with a society that dismantles your authority and autonomy. More questions please raise your hands please raise your hands.

[01:03:37] I am particularly interested in the phenomena of safe zones, political correctness and the kinds of psychology that goes into that kind of perception of threat or indeed an actual threat and the forces political forces that are in other forces that are encouraging and hyping the narratives that many become hypersensitive around certain issues. So I guess my point is that there's certainly room for reasonable criticism reasonable criticism of immigration policies and reasonable criticism of Zionism reasonable criticism of mine or of victim you know is quote unquote victim groups and in this haze of what I describe as hyper hysteria at some point. Certainly there are people trying to capitalize on this hyper hysteria in encouraging people to feel as if they're being victims as though they are being in fact maybe not victimized it may be maybe conflict as opposed to abuse. I'd say you haven't made mention of that issue here and maybe I haven't read your book.

[01:04:51] It's really something that I'd like to get a hold of I described it completely differently than you did. Because what I'm seeing. I mean this whole thing about people capitalizing on a blah blah. Well I don't look at it that way. I think that we're in a situation as a nation as with different religious groups thinking about being Jewish right now in a time of this Jewish supremacy connected with a nation state, being white or also just with our friends where if we say how what we are actually doing wrong and how we are actually contributing to somebody else's pain then we fear that losing any kind of human connection or recognition of being human.

[01:05:45] And so I'm hoping I think that the solution is in how the group relates. Like right now for example I am asked to hurt people all the time. People always saying me why are you talking to her? why did you invite her? why are you working with him? why do you? You know I'm always being asked to shun somebody and we had this fake idea that we're good people and we're loyal good people if we help our friends or our other people in our group hurt people because when you resist that when you're when you're in resistance to that there's a high level of punishment. But instead if we recognized real loyalty and real friendship and real love as the thing that says how can I help you think this through differently.

[01:06:32] How are you contributing to this. How can I help you to negotiate instead of how can I help you hurt that person.

[01:06:40] Then we make it more possible for there to be more flexibility so that's my take on I think the same thing that you're describing. Questions please.

[01:06:52] Hi. I was hoping you could talk a little bit more spell out the differentiation you're making between conflict and abuse. It strikes me that in a similar way in a similar way that the terminology around victimhood is being appropriated and misused by folks who aren't necessarily victims. There is also a pervasive narrative that I'm familiar with around conflict terminology around framing abuse as just conflict to sort of erase the existence of abuse especially in intimate partner relationships. So I'm wondering if you can spell out a little bit more differently in terms of what an intimate partner relationships.

[01:07:39] Well I think.

[01:07:40] I mean I will just repeat a little bit I guess but it's if there's a if things are if you're participating and making things worse if you're escalating because there's something that's at stake that you feel uncomfortable.

[01:07:53] Let's let's start a different way. People know the work of Sara Ahmed. You know she's really smart. Right. And she wrote this incredible book called the purpose of happiness. And in this book she talks about you know how there is a neo-liberal concept that entitled people should never have to be uncomfortable and that somehow if we are ever uncomfortable it means someone is attacking us someone is harassing us stalking us abusing us because we feel uncomfortable. And she analyzes how actually the only way a person can never feel uncomfortable is if other people are

suppressed you can only live without being uncomfortable. If other people are hurt at other people's expense. So if we can allow that we must feel uncomfortable being uncomfortable is is the place of growth and that we can support each other and not run away from each other when we're uncomfortable. Right then we can recognize how we are contributing to conflicts and how we escalate as smokescreens to avoid self-criticism. And that's true for societies. It's true for religious groups and it's true for clicks and families.

[01:09:13] Questions please. More questions.

[01:09:15] I see a lot in the room Hi my name is Sanj Basha. Shout out to the Seattle Public Library for holding spaces that center queer and trans people of color like the previous one Davida put on called Beautiful Struggle. Sara I have totally fanboy to over you for the six plus years of my academic life.

[01:09:36] Um so I'm a little bit nervous but I guess my question may or may not be able to be answered shortly or is directed towards a book that I haven't read yet but I think it's easier for white people to talk about conflict without holding ancestral traumas in their bodies or experiences that lead to both being the victims of the state and also being perpetrators of inherited abusive behaviors. And so my question would be in terms of how we as queer and trans people of colors who are activists who live in non normative communities and families who are individuals with compound trauma and grief and behaviors engage with actual abuse in our communities in our communities and our community based relationships that without relying on punitive measures within our communities. So I guess in building off of not relying on those even outside of the state how do we tell the difference between abuse and conflict within our communities when there's so much complexity. And how do we. Because we know that we work tirelessly to resist the mainstream punitive structures and to understand the structures of justifying abuse. Yet it does happen in our communities.

[01:11:10] Obviously I don't know the answer to that right. Okay so but I have some thoughts.

[01:11:15] Okay. I mean one two things. So one thing is that. You know I think the best idea I had writing this like I think the smartest thing here the thing that I'm most proud of is when I realized that in some ways supremacy behavior and traumatized behavior are mirror images of each other.

[01:11:37] And let me. And you know it's ironic because the supremacy in one party produces trauma in another party right. But you know the supremacist person is raised to to be so entitled that they feel that no one has the right to question them. And if somebody is questioning them or opposing them or asking them to God forbid think rethink themselves they experience that as a terrible attack it's so violent. Right. But sometimes when we're traumatized and we're not in full recovery we have the same reaction because we're so fragile and it's so hard to keep it together. And here's this person asking you to be self-critical when all you've ever heard about yourself is criticism.

[01:12:19] And it feels like an attack but it's not so this overstating of harm can come both from trauma and from supremacy. So if we're always looking to who we should punish then we cannot deal

with that reality. But if we shift our focus so that our goal is to understand what's happening instead of trying to figure out who to punish then we can face that reality. And one of the things that um Katherine Hodes is instructing social workers to do is to ask people for the order of events I know. I mean I now do this for myself. Like if I'm upset about something I asked myself. Sarah what were the order of events. And you know I usually start out with. And she did this and she did that and she did that and then I get to my part and I smooch over it you know and it's like when you when you're going through the order of events to try to understand what happened. Knowing that no one's going to get punished in the end. That that's not the goal. You can start to see where the escalation happens where the smokescreens happen where people are defended where they're trying to shut down things about themselves that they're uncomfortable about but you produced that not to humiliate somebody or to isolate them or shun them. But you produce that so that we can understand what that human beings experiences. And this is why I really don't like shunning you know it. I feel like when you when you're shunning people there how they see their life and how they see the experience that information gets removed from the conversation.

[01:13:57] I recently was in Montreal and I'm an artist there Morgan Page and I facilitated a town hall on queer and trans suicidality. This is a few months ago and we had about 200 people came and we talked for like two hours and it was an amazing conversation. In fact we recorded it and we're going to publish it in February. But one of the things that came up over and over again is that when people are shunned they feel like they want to kill themselves. I mean it's like a we creating kind of a prison model. You know we all have to live together. And it's like you don't have to like each other but to shun people and to and to punish them for because because they're upset because they've done something that they wish they hadn't done or you wish they hadn't nor they haven't put certain things together or they're suffering and they're expressing that they're externalizing their anxieties whatever it is we have to put that out on the table so that we understand what we're you know how we're living. So that those are some of my thoughts. Well I've been trying to address it consistently all night. So was there a specific I mean I like I as a white person I cannot give an answer to something about that's internal to a community of color. Right.

[01:15:16] Let's take one more question and then there'll be time to get your book signed to chat with one another to ask private questions to meet new friends to make out all sorts of things. So you want to have the last public question.

[01:15:33] I have three questions rolled in one. And my first one is there was a Zen called betrayal that came out a few years ago. I wonder if you have read it and I'm curious about your responses to it. It's been called Betrayal. Yeah I never heard of it second question is I think what you have just talked about can be construed as questioning or mistrusting survivors. And I wonder if you have encountered that and your thoughts around that. And then my third question is what do you think of the term rape culture.

[01:16:07] And I guess expanding on that question do you feel like it separates just how hetero patriarchy is so integrated into capitalism and to focus on culture on this term culture and behaviors kind of furthers that or obscures that relationship like people experience hetero sexism, sexual

harassment every day on the job but then when we talk about rape culture we're talking often about the most quote unquote shocking moments and then the term rape culture is thrown around a lot.

[01:16:50] So I'm just wondering what you think. Well your analysis is more sophisticated than mine.

[01:16:56] So why do we let what you just said stand because I mean I you know to me the term rape culture is a term that can be used by a lot of different people to mean a lot of different things. But I think that you know what you just raised is for is that answers that question. Let me go back to the other thing that you asked about people construing what I'm saying as being something that undermines survivors. That accusation has surfaced but only from people who have not read the book and I have not heard that accusation yet from anyone who has read the entire book because I don't think I'm doing that now. There are some people don't like the title. I've gotten a lot of critiques based on the title because it has the words not abuse in the title. And and there were people who were concerned that I was going to take away a very hard one understanding that they've accomplished in their lives that to recognize that they haven't experienced abuse but once they actually read the book they think that people can see that that's not what I'm doing.

[01:18:05] So that's my that's my response.

[01:18:08] Do you want to say something back. Well we'll be here for anyone who knows people in Vancouver.

[01:18:21] There will be reading tomorrow at 730 at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Day after tomorrow 730 Canadian Broadcasting Company.

[01:18:31] If you want to come into one of my events the next contagious exchange is on February 1st with John treat and sad Goler Sojourner and Hugo house. I love hugs if you want a hug. I've got it here and Sarah will sign books.

[01:18:52] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.