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R.47. Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present, and Future of Feminism

Interview R-0880

Trisha Harms

April 21, 2016

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ABSTRACT – Trisha Harms

Interviewee: Trisha Harms
Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman
Interview Date: 21 April 2016
Location: Interviewee's home in Northeast Minneapolis
Length: Approximately 82 minutes

Trisha Harms works in the communications department of the AFSCME union and serves on the board of the Minnesota Women's Consortium. Born to a teenaged single mother who came from a German immigrant family, she grew up impressed by her mother's ability to manage raising her and creating a career for herself despite a lack of higher education. Harms struggled in high school partly as a result of being "fat," and trying to figure out her own identity. She came to understand feminism through an early support for abortion rights, and then discovered a feminist community through internet chat rooms, message boards, and Bust magazine. After dropping out of college in Chicago, she worked and then graduated from Minneapolis Community and Technical College. With support from her mentors, she attended Hamline University for a bachelor's degree, and then obtained a Masters in Advocacy and Political Leadership. She describes her work in AFSCME; and her passionate belief in the important role of the labor movement in supporting women's issues. She discusses the Women's Economic Security Act of Minnesota and why WESA didn't do enough for women of color. Harms discusses her experience blogging about her decision to have weight loss surgery from a feminist/queer perspective after years of identifying as "fat positive." She argues that feminism needs to be more inclusive of women of color, and expresses an identification with Third Wave feminism. She articulates a frustration with the white male gay marriage movement activists and their lack of commitment to issues facing poor queer people and trans people of color. This interview was collected as part of Rachel F. Seidman's research for her book *Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present and Future of the U.S. Women's Movement*.

FIELD NOTES – Trisha Harms

(compiled April 21, 2016)

Interviewee: Trisha Harms
Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman
Interview Date: 21 April 2016
Location: Interviewee's home in North Minneapolis

THE INTERVIEWEE. Trisha Harms works in the communications department of the AFSCME union in Minnesota and serves on the board of the Minnesota Women's Consortium.

THE INTERVIEWER. Rachel F. Seidman is an historian and associate director of the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview took place in Harms' home in North Minneapolis that she shares with her wife and her brother, who were both home at the time of the interview. Her wife sat in the nearby living room while Harms and I recorded the interview at her dining room table. Her brother was in the basement, and he came up at one point during the recording. They had a small cat who was creeping around the windowsills during the interview and at one point jumped from a window onto Seidman's back, surprising her and Harms and causing a bit of a disruption to the interview. Harms is warm and funny, and after asking the interviewer if she was allowed to swear, salted her language with curse words pretty regularly.

NOTE ON RECORDING. Recorded on a digital zoom recorder.

TRANSCRIPT—TRISHA HARMS

Interviewee: TRISHA HARMS

Interviewer: Rachel Seidman

Interview Date: April 21, 2016

Location: Minneapolis, MN

Length: 81:44 minutes

START OF RECORDING

RACHEL SEIDMAN: OK. This is Rachel Seidman and I'm here with Trisha Harms in Minneapolis. Today is Thursday, April 21, 2016. We are undertaking an oral history interview for a project that is currently called "#Feminism: Speaking Up and Talking Back in the Digital Age." Trisha, I'm just going to ask you to start by telling me what you knew about your grandparents. Did you know them? Where did they come from? What did they do?

TRISHA HARMS: Sure. I was born to a single mom so I only know my biological, maternal grandparents. She was eighteen when I was born, so we lived with them when I was a baby. They're both from rural North Dakota. My grandma was a schoolteacher in a one-room school room and my grandpa's sister, little sister, was one of her students so they met at the little schoolroom when he went to pick up his sister from school one day. They--I think they had just dated a couple of times and they ended up having to get married because they were naughty. The story that I know from them is my grandpa was being scouted for minor league baseball and he ended up having to give that up because my grandma got knocked up. Back then you had to get married or live in shame for the rest of your life or something. They got married. They were young. Then

they moved to the cities here in Minneapolis after a while and had four daughters. They were both German, like, all German. My grandma's parents were second generation and my gran said their parents had come from Germany, and my grandpa's parents had come from Germany but via Switzerland. His parents were first-generation immigrants. They were both farm kids from out in the sticks, Midwestern farm kids. That's what I know about them.

RS: So your mom grew up on the farm?

TH: My mom grew up sort of--I think they lived in a town when they were--. It was like Wahpeton, North Dakota, so it's a town. My grandpa's parents, my great-grandparents, still had their farm so they spent a lot of time out working on that farm.

RS: OK. And so your mom, tell me about your mom.

TH: She's an incredible woman. She had me when she was eighteen. We lived with my grandparents for a little while and then she sort of struck out on her own. She went to tech school for a while and ended up building a pretty decent career for herself. I was always really impressed that she was able to take care of me and be a professional and command respect.

RS: What was her job?

TH: She started out just doing administrative work. When I was a baby, she was cleaning motel rooms and working at Kentucky Fried Chicken. We lived in a little apartment upstairs from a Chinese food, hole-in-the-wall restaurant. Every day, all she could afford to eat was an egg roll from the restaurant downstairs. They had it ready for her. I don't really know what she did between when she was a maid cleaning motel rooms until when we moved to Minneapolis and she had a good job working at a law firm doing

accounting. She didn't go to school for it; she just figured it out. Also in that time period she--it's kind of a crazy story the way that she met and ended up marrying the man who is now my dad, who adopted me when I was seven or eight. They actually met in a bar when she was pregnant with me and he was dating her best friend. She told her best friend, "You have to break up with that guy because he's a raging alcoholic and he's up to no good and he's just a sexy bad boy but he's not boyfriend material." The best friend did break up with him and he basically started stalking her.

RS: Your mom?

TH: Yes. He basically started stalking my mom. By that time she had a baby, an infant child. She was a teenager. She ended up moving to Minneapolis to get away from him. He would do things like pass out in his car with his car blocking her car in so she couldn't leave the parking lot when she would get out of school. Or call the landline-- this is 1983 so we only have a landline--so he would call her on the phone and drunkenly pass out on the phone and so her phone was off the hook, right? Or he would camp out outside her apartment door. So that's pretty intense; that's kind of weird. So she moved here to Minneapolis when I was two, basically, from what she tells me, to get away from him, and got a decent job here. We lived in a little rental, a basement apartment, underneath some elderly people that were renting out their basement. My grandparents still lived in North Dakota, where he was. My grandpa was also a raging alcoholic so they would go drink together and my grandpa would tell him where she was. He ended up going to do some time and my mom heard about it and since she was here and had a decent job, for some reason she was "I'm going to send him a card while he's in jail and tell him 'when you get out, if you want help finding a job I'll help you find a job in The

Cities'." So she never heard back and then one day she comes to pick me up from kindergarten and we pull up to our little rental basement apartment and he is standing in the driveway. She said "What are you doing here?" I had no idea who he was, obviously; I hadn't seen him since I was two. And he said, "Well, I'm sober now. It's time for us to get married." She had a boyfriend at the time and she [said], "I am dating a guy," but he ended up moving in shortly afterwards. They were in love. It's a totally--am I allowed to swear?

RS: Yes.

TH: It's a totally fucked up story, but also they really love each other.

RS: And had he straightened out?

TH: He never drank again. He still hasn't. He's going on sixty and hasn't had a drop. I don't know if I would call him sober. I would call him abstinent. They have a tumultuous relationship as people do who get together in those strange circumstances but they have been married for, I think, twenty-five years. He moved in with us. Actually, he moved in with us for a while as he was looking for a place. Then he got an apartment and my mom bought a house, amazingly, a single mom was able to buy a house in northeast Minneapolis. It was just the two of us for a while and then he moved in and then they had my brother when I was seven. Then we got in the car to go on a trip to Denver where his sister lives. So we were going to go on a trip to Denver with the baby brother and Mom and Dad and we got to--we stopped in Omaha at my grandpa's house where he was living at the time and then we got in the car to continue on to Denver. After we were about half an hour away from Grandpa's house they told me that they were going to get married

while we were in Colorado. They had planned this whole elopement. Only the aunt that lived there knew about it. Then we had a really cool wedding.

RS: Do you remember how you felt about that?

TH: I was super excited just because I had never probably experienced a wedding with people I was very close to. A big wedding. I had gone to one other wedding. I think it was my dad's brother got married. And I can't actually remember if that was before or after they got married--probably after. So maybe I had never even been to a wedding. It was in this old castle up in the mountains and it was just so cool to me. But also I was dying for somebody to tell the secret to. It was fun. It was a happy memory. I was seven so my memory of it is pretty blurry. One of my favorite things about it is it was this old stone "castle" is what they called it. And it had a stone porch and so when they were doing their pictures--the picture of the bride and groom out in front of the castle--I was standing on the porch. When you're a kid, you're like "I can't see them so they can't see me" so I stood behind one of these stone pillars in my funny wedding Easter outfit thinking the photographer can't see me; but I'm totally in every one of the pictures. Just me in my Easter outfit. Seven-year-old awkward girl being like, "They can't see me in the pictures!" That was funny. Every time we look at those pictures, "There's Trisha thinking she's invisible."

RS: Funny. So as you grew up what do you remember about, well, I guess about kind of gender roles in your family? Your mom had been a single mom and working and supporting you and everything. What do you remember or what do you think you learned from watching them in terms of gender dynamics or gender roles?

TH: I think I learned a lot that women do everything. My mom always just did everything. She cooked, she cleaned, she worked, she paid for everything. She was the disciplinarian and she was also the comforter. In that sense, I learned there's not really a specific role that women have to take because I grew up with a woman who didn't put up with shit from anybody. That's one really important lesson I learned very early on.

RS: Do you have an example of how you--

TH: Yes. She had tons of boyfriends when I was growing up. I remember one time she had kind of a bad boyfriend who was over at our apartment. My memory is a little blurry but I have a memory of him wanting to whip me with his belt and she locked me in the bathroom and got him out of our apartment. She was taking care of business. "There's no way you're touching my daughter." I think it was Halloween because I had a bunny costume on. I remember being in the bathroom, locked in the bathroom by myself, terrified and seeing myself in this bunny costume in the mirror which is a super-bizarre memory to have, and listening to them arguing outside of the door. And then he left. Also she always worked for attorneys, who can be difficult to work with. And she was always the manager when she got to The [Twin] Cities and started on this career path. She never let people walk over her. That's something I still struggle with and I think, as women, it's ingrained in us to let ourselves be doormats and be small; but she never was small. She was an inspirational person to grow up around.

When my dad moved into the house, he definitely took on more of the male, traditional male roles. He did the lawn things and he had a manly job and he didn't clean. He took out the garbage. He became more of the disciplinarian. But I never was directly told by either of them or ever felt pushed into a specific gender expression or gender role.

RS: So by the time you get to high school, how would you describe yourself?
Who were you in high school?

TH: Oh, my God. This is so weird to even think about. I was the most awkward high school person. I didn't know my identity. I think a lot of people don't know their identity and in high school; some people are good at adopting an identity and expressing it. I was just a weirdo. I had my hands in all these different pots, like "I want to be an artist," "I want to be a musician," "I want to be super goth," "I want to be punk rock." "I want to be a feminist," "I want to wear overalls," "I want to wear fancy dresses all the time." I just did not know what to do with myself. It didn't help--I was a fat kid. It's really hard to be a fat kid and I think it's even harder if you're a girl. And I was also struggling with my sexuality so I was just the most awkward creature you could encounter in the world. I feel like if I met myself now as that person I would be really uncomfortable but also "I feel so bad for you." Not that that experience is unique. Every high schooler is a weirdo and everybody looks back at their high school days and just cringes, I'm sure. Except for the coolest people who are not cool anymore. I was just a super-awkward weirdo. I was president of the German club. I played every instrument in band. I had a couple friends. I also really wanted to be a bad-ass but I was such a goody-two-shoes my whole life. I was always very concerned with making my parents proud of me and not disappointing--I still hate the feeling of disappointing them or disappointing people that care about me. Which is interesting. Like, my brother, he's in the basement right now. He is seven years younger than me and he never gave a shit. He always said whatever the fuck he wanted to all the time. And if I drive one mile past where my dad told me I had to stop the car, he's going to know. It was just weird. I had a lot of

conflicting identities inside myself. I had short hair. I had green hair. I was really uncomfortable with my body and tried to hide it; but I also adopted this sort of like "I don't give a shit if I'm fat" persona, which I held onto for a very long time. High school was rough. It was rough.

RS: You said you--one of the things you were toying with was "I want to be a feminist." What did that mean to you at the time?

TH: The first thing I really associated with feminism was being pro-choice. I didn't know a lot of history of the women's movement or what it really meant to be a feminist. I just knew I had had a conversation with my mom where we were both "Well, it's fucked up if people are saying women can't have abortions." And I was "Absolutely! That's something I want to do something about." When I was in high school it was the blooming of the internet. I found a couple of message boards. The one that I was most active on was the Bust Magazine message board. The women that I encountered on there were so inspiring in how confident and true to themselves they were and how outspoken they were on issues that mattered to them. They were able to take the feminist mentality and apply it to their own lives and just live their lives in a feminist, pro-woman, I-want-to-do-what-I-want-to-do-and-fuck-everybody-else kind of way. So to me, in high school, that's what it was. I just want to be a bad bitch who crusades for women.

RS: Do you remember how you found those message boards? Was there someone who sort of pointed you toward them?

TH: I had this one friend who was always a little bit cooler than me. Her name is Emily. I'm pretty sure she found Bust for me. Or somebody gave me a Bust magazine or something. I can't remember exactly. Maybe we found a Bust magazine at a bookstore

but then we found the website and we were both super-active on the message boards. Then we ended up having a Bust meet-up and I'm still friends with one of the girls that we had a meet-up with. Emily and I are both still friends with her.

RS: So tell me what it means to be active on a message board and then what is a meet-up. But start with the message boards. What were you doing?

TH: Posting. I guess they still have message boards, but it's just a thread of conversation. There would be "What's the crafty shit you did today?" or "What do you think about the thing this person said in this magazine? Let's talk about this." One of the things we did was a girl song, girl singer mixed tape exchange. It was just whatever but it was a bunch of awesome ladies.

RS: And then the meet-up. What was that?

TH: We have the May Day Parade here, so May Day was coming. All of the women from the message board who lived in the Twin Cities decided to get together at this big festival and do the festival together. We had a big picnic. I think there were twelve people. We made friends. It was the first kernel of meeting people from the internet.

RS: That's interesting because it's moving from the virtual space into real community.

TH: Yeah!

RS: And you continued to meet with those women?

TH: Yes, we had a couple more meetings. There were more--we didn't have so many big meet-up meetings after that. It turned into more like a couple of us remained friends over a period of time and had little get-togethers.

RS: And so then were you looking toward going to college after high school?

TH: I was. I'd started doing college in high school. I did the PSEO program.

RS: What's that?

TH: Post-Secondary Education Options. It's basically where your high school pays for you to go to college classes. I took German because I was super-nerdy and I spoke German better than anyone at the school. So they sent me to the college. They sent me to the U[niversity of Minnesota] for German and some other classes. I stayed at the U for one semester and then I met a guy on the internet and decided to move to Chicago and go to college in Chicago for fashion design because that's where he lived. So I did it. I was eighteen. My dad and I went out to Chicago, our first trip that we ever took together. Stayed in the world's shittiest, grossest motel while we looked for apartments. He was just appalled at the whole situation.

RS: Did he meet the boy?

TH: No, the boy was a secret. They thought I was just going to go to college. We finally found this apartment. He was, like, "God, let's get out of this hell-hole city." We came home and then we packed up all my stuff. The whole family went out, set up my apartment, and they left. And then I was in Chicago. I dated the boy for like two years. He ended up moving in with me. I dropped out of college pretty quickly. I think I went for a year.

RS: Why did you drop out?

TH: Money. I was really--I didn't get my financial aid in order. So then it was "You owe them a million dollars." I was just having a big party and didn't take care of business. I dropped out. Then it was really hard to make it there. I didn't know what I was

doing. I didn't have a goal because I had dropped out of school so I wasn't pursuing anything. I'm definitely the kind of person who needs to have a path forward. And I wasn't really happy in that relationship anyway. I'm very insecure all through high school and then finally having this person who really adored me and really loved me. It was really exciting but even if that person really loves you and really adores you, if it's not the right person for you, you have to move on at some point. So I moved back. I moved back in with my mom for six months and then I got an apartment here in North Minneapolis. I started working at a coffee shop and really focusing on paying down all of this debt that I had racked up so I could go back to school, and trying to figure out what the hell I wanted to do with my life. That was--that whole period of time between Chicago and going back to school is kind of a blur. I was working super-hard. I didn't really have a goal or an ambition or a passion. I just partied and worked, partied and worked, partied and worked. It's a blur. I finally went back to school. I went to MCTC when I was--I must have been twenty-three or twenty-four. I started going back to community college.

RS: MCTC is Metro--

TH: Minneapolis Community and Technical College. So I paid down my debt enough. I paid back all my student loans enough for them to allow me to take out more student loans, basically. Which is always a great plan. I stayed at that coffee shop and I worked and worked and worked. I went to MCTC and I went through this phase where I was "I want to be a baker. I want to own a bakery so I'm going to go for pastry school." But I ended up doing business management. I really have always wanted to be my own boss. And I always have been the kind of person who has a million ideas about cool businesses to start. So that was what I did. And I got done at MCTC. I still didn't really

have a clear idea of what I was doing and I had this weird associate's degree that I didn't really know what to do with. I was, like, "Well, maybe I'll go to school for real shit." One of my English teachers at MCTC had [said], "You have a lot more in you than just being a manager somewhere or working at a coffee shop." I think her exact words, I remember this very clearly, were "You are a scholar. You belong at a real college." So I was, like, "I guess I'm going to go to real college. I don't know what else to do." By that time I was 26. I ended up going to Hamline to get my bachelor's, and I did Women's Studies and English. I didn't know a whole lot about women's studies but I knew that I was passionate about women's rights and I love history and, obviously, women are underrepresented in history. So women's studies seemed like a good fit and also I've always loved literature and reading. So that makes sense. I still didn't know what the hell I was going to do. I had an idea in my head that I was going to go get my masters in library science but I ended up not doing that.

RS: Who did you study with at Hamline?

TH: I studied with Kristin Mapel Bloomberg. I'll bet you've heard quite a bit about her. She was probably one of my first real mentors, not in an official capacity but somebody that I looked up to as a mentor and still do. I stayed in touch with her. She came to my wedding. She's great and really helps you figure out what to do with the knowledge that you've gained and helps you find a path and helps you apply it. She really sparked this sort of motivation to create change in the world and not just be an academic. This teacher--[simultaneous mumbles, perhaps a mechanical adjustment?] I did that. And I had another really great advisor in my English program. Her name was Veena Deo.

TH: She had done a lot of work on the great migration and the African Diaspora and African American literature, which is not my specialty at all but it was, at the time, that's what I ended up doing my senior thesis on. She was a really great, great person for me to have as a guide at the time. And she had had a very, not outright "I'm a feminist and this is what I did," but her path had been so, she had been so determined to make it through all of these systems that have been designed to keep her down.

RS: Was she an African American?

TH: No, she was Indian, like from India. She had gone and gotten her doctorate in Kentucky which I can't imagine was easy at the time when she was there doing her doctorate in African American literature as an immigrant woman from India. She was amazing.

They both encouraged me to go on to graduate school so I did, still not knowing what the hell I was going to do with my life. It basically came down to "Do I go to the Humphrey Institute at the U[niversity] of M[innesota], which is a public policy--it's a really intense public policy program and it's very--the way I usually describe it is it's very quantitative- and economic-focused. And then this other program popped up out of nowhere. I was, like, "What the hell am I going to do? I gotta go to grad school before I have to start paying back those other loans." Erin Parrish from the Women's Consortium sent me a message, an email or a Facebook message or something, saying "I just heard about this really cool program that is up in Duluth. You should look at it." It was the master of advocacy and political leadership program.

RS: Now how did you two know each other?

TH: I had interned at the Women's Consortium when I was doing my women's studies bachelors. So two weeks before the semester started I called the MAPL people and I [said] "I really want to do this program. It looks amazing." And I went and had my entry interview at the founder's house. The founder of the program [said], "Come over. Let's talk and see if it's a good fit." And then two weeks later I was in grad school. I wasn't even in grad school; I was in a van of random people from grad school driving up to Duluth together to start grad school.

RS: Wow.

TH: Yeah.

RS: Did you then live in Duluth for a while?

TH: No. We would go every weekend. We would get a van. At the time it was through the U of M. It was at the University of Minnesota at Duluth so we would get a U of M van from The Cities and drive it up together and then drive it back. We were only there for one night. Now the program has moved to Metro State University which is in St. Paul and people commute together from Greater Minnesota to come to the program.

RS: So it was aimed at people who were working?

TH: Yes. And at that point I was still at the coffee shop. I had worked at the coffee shop at that point for more than ten years.

RS: Which coffee shop?

TH: It's called The Coffee Shop Northeast. I recommend that you go there. If you go there, they have pictures of me in the bathroom.

RS: [laughter]

TH: Making funny faces at the toilet. So when you sit down to pee, there's Trisha making faces at you. It started out as Audubon Coffee. When I was 20 I started working there. And then that owner closed and the two women that I worked with there, who are sisters, and I decided to reopen it as the new shop. So I was going to be their business partner. That was right around the time when I was looking at grad school-- when I was deciding what to do about moving on from MCTC. I was, like, "Should I open this coffee shop with these people or should I go to college?" I ended up bailing on them and going to college. Then I was a manager there for another eight years when it reopened as The Coffee Shop Northeast.

RS: And so what was it about the program in Duluth that sounded so great to you?

TH: It's really person-centered. And I know that's a term that gets thrown around a lot and means a lot of different things; but it's really customizable. The idea of having a cohort that you spend time with. It's basically structured, you have a cohort that you do one class with each semester, this same group of people. And you also spend every weekend with that same group of people. There are electives that you don't necessarily have, you have other folks who aren't in your cohort but-- On a personal level, I had never had a dorm or a traditional college experience or living with other people or being in the kind of setting where you create lasting friendships outside of high school. That part of it was really appealing to me. When I went to Hamline I was ten years older than everybody else that was there. I didn't make friends. I was twenty-eight, so I had my life going on. The part about having that core group of people and having that sort of experience was really appealing to me. But the program is focused on how to

create change in the areas that you want to work in. So you can focus on non-profit work; you can focus on running for public office, or what you do when you are in office; how does the legislature work; how to run campaigns. You can concentrate on the organized labor sector; I think now they also just opened a business-focused concentration but when I was there it was non-profit, public sector or labor. I ended up doing the non-profit concentration just because it made the most sense to me. At that time I felt like I was going to be going into advocacy work. I learned how to start a non-profit, run a non-profit, do taxes for a non-profit, run a board, be effective. Another big thing that really is appealing about that program is the network that you come out of it with. A lot of the instructors are really well-known names in their fields. We host events that are aimed at making sure that students who are in this program come out of it with a network that cares about them so that they can succeed in not just having a career but doing good work for Minnesota.

RS: As you were doing all this, were women's issues at the center of what you were thinking you wanted to work on?

TH: Yes, definitely. I had interned at the Women's Consortium. I did another internship at the Women's Consortium during my graduate studies. I maintained my involvement with them. Also, most of my big projects in grad school were focused on reproductive health, reproductive healthcare access. I got my job at the Union halfway through the program, AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] where I work. Then I was working on issues that are economic issues and I was also still volunteering at the Women's Consortium and I was working on my degree. It started to really come together, how all those things sort of mesh together to form a

"this is where I fit into this, where my passion is and the work that I've been given to do and the work that I'm capable of doing." Right now my focus is reproductive justice and women's economic security. What I'm focused in on right now is economic security for women of color. I think in the women's movement in general we have been, unfortunately, a white women's movement for a very long time. I think that that is really terrible in a lot of ways; but also we can't continue to call this a women's movement or a feminist movement if we're not being inclusive. So right now, particularly at the Women's Consortium, I'm doing a lot of work on equity and inclusivity and making sure that the policy work we do doesn't impact groups that are silenced differently than it impacts the white ladies that are at the table talking about these issues.

RS: So how did you start thinking in that way? Who did you learn that from?

TH: My job is communications at the union. I work in communications, specifically digital communication. So part of that is when I am speaking for 43,000 people I am faced with coming up with a way to frame whatever we're asking our members to get behind in a way that makes them feel passionate about it. So in some ways it's really easy for me to talk about economic issues if I say "Look! These women are struggling because we can't raise the minimum wage." But then, part of it is that I'm in this industry where I'm having to use those as messages, but then it started to really connect to me. I'm not really sure where it made the connection. I think part of it was I did a project on food security and it was, "How does this specifically impact women? Why is food security a women's issue? Why is racial justice a women's issue? Why is the minimum wage important to women?" It became clear to me to every social justice

issue impacts women in a myriad of different ways and those consequences are overshadowed all of the time.

RH: Tell me more about the union? Who are these members? What's the focus of the work that the union does?

TH: I work for a union of 43,000 public employees.

RH: What does this stand for?

TH: It was the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. I do digital communications for them. When I speak for the union I am speaking for all of our members based on directives the Board of Directors, that have been elected by the members, have given to my supervisor and then down to me.

RS: What percentage of your members are people of color?

TH: I have no idea.

RS: One of the things that I've been hearing a lot about from different perspectives is the Women's Economic Security Act that was passed [in Minnesota]. I'm really interested in that and the Women's Consortium because the Women's Consortium is unique in the country and, seems to me, WESA is also pretty unique in the country and I think there is a connection there.

TH: I think that part of that is because Minnesota is unique. I don't really know how to articulate that, but we're the home of Paul Wellstone. We have a lot of people who still cling to that era and those values. I think a lot of people think of his slogan as the Minnesota slogan. That was, "We all do better when we all do better." We've always been a progressive state even when we haven't necessarily elected progressives. In general, we've always been a pretty progressive state. Huge voter turnout and huge involvement,

huge civic involvement. It is unique. The Consortium and that package of bills are completely unique. You're right. I wish that they weren't. I wish that they were everywhere. This year we have another women's economic security act. It's the Women of Color Opportunities Act, and I'm really excited about that. I think it has not gotten as much traction as I was hoping for and unfortunately I've been distracted by the things I'm working on at work so I haven't been able to focus on it completely.

RS: So where is that coming from? Who--

TH: There are two state representatives. Rena Moran--she's from St. Paul. R-e-n-a M-o-r-a-n-- Senator Patricia Torres Ray. They are behind the bill. It's a package of bills that invest in economic opportunity specifically geared for women of color. My understanding is a lot of them are also geared towards neighborhoods where there's a lack of economic opportunities, North Minneapolis, where we are right now, being one of them. I don't know if you know this but there's not a whole lot of job opportunities around here. There's also not a whole lot of access to resources or basic needs. This is a food desert by technical terms. It won't be for very much--well, this one still will be, here, but if we went down a couple of blocks, they're building a new co-op down there. There's no grocery store within walkable distance here. There's convenience stores with junk food, that's it. There's also nowhere to have a job over here. If you don't have a job, you can't afford a car; if you don't have a car, you can't drive to a job. If you don't have a grocery store you can walk to, you end up feeding your family junk food from the convenience store which happens to also be four times more expensive. If you buy real food at a convenience store, it costs four times as much. How do we expect anybody to climb that ladder?

RS: So the new bills, do you think they're--. I was talking earlier today with Kenya McKnight and part of what she was saying was the first set of bills, the WESA, didn't help black women very much. Is that your impression, too? Do you think that opinion is shared by other people?

TH: Not being a black woman, I really don't have the authority to make that judgment, but I feel that the laws that were passed were not as comprehensive as we had hoped. Unfortunately the way the system works is, when you have a package of very progressive bills, pieces get chopped off at every step. When we finally got to the end, it was missing a lot of stuff that we had really hoped to get in there.

RS: Like what?

TH: Paid family leave, which we're working on this time. But things like requiring employers to allow nursing mothers appropriate accommodations, I don't think that that doesn't help black women; but I agree with Kenya that there needs to be specific legislative initiatives that target improving economic circumstances for black women. I think that that package of bills was not as successful at helping all women because it got chopped down so much. I think when we have bills--and I don't honestly remember all of the specifics of WESA--I don't remember everything it accomplished. If you passed paid family leave only for state employees, of course, that disproportionately benefits the majority people who are white that work there. In some ways, Kenya is totally right just because the people that those are impacting, the groups of people that are covered by those requirements or regulations are in specific types of jobs which other marginalized groups of people have not had adequate opportunities to get into. I agree with her somewhat. I don't have specifics about it.

RS: So you found your kind of niche by combining the women's economic issues and the union work.

TH: What I love about working in unions, about working for this union but about the labor movement, is that women who are in unions always do better. Women in communities where there's strong union membership, even if they're not in a union, also do better. And I also really love that unions are willing to stand up for economic legislation that helps people who aren't their members. My biggest example on this is raising the minimum wage. State employees don't make minimum wage; county employees don't make minimum wage; none of our members make minimum wage. We spent a whole year putting all of our force behind getting Minnesota's minimum wage lifted by two dollars because we care about helping everyone out. I feel very strongly that unions are one of the last major forces holding the line for letting people even get into the middle class or helping people climb out of that hole just a little bit. The middle class doesn't even exist anymore. On paper, sure, I'm middle class, but I still fucking live paycheck to paycheck. The opportunity for anyone to move up in the world is so small. I think for women, specifically, having a union there to back you up is one of the best--I don't want to call it a back-up plan but it's a good support system. It protects women from not getting paid as much, from being passed over for promotion, from not being taken seriously, and that gives them a place to have their voice heard about issues that impact them. I think the women's movement and the labor movement would do well to work together more closely.

RS: Well, I was going to ask you do--I mean, you see these kind of connections but do you feel like the union--. Are you the only feminist in the union or is

that a kind of welcomed perspective and are women's issues seen as the bread and butter of the union?

TH: So this falls in two different ways. I represent the union in my role on the Women's Consortium board. AFSCME Council 5 supports the work—financially and by giving my time to them—what the Consortium does. And we also always stand up for issues of choice. When Planned Parenthood is under attack we speak up for them. We're there for them. Unfortunately, organized labor is being attacked from every aspect just as much as reproductive health. So we just barely survived the Supreme Court case where--I don't wish to speak ill of the dead, but if Antonin Scalia had not passed away when he did the labor movement would have been crushed. There's five more Supreme Court cases just like that in the pipeline. Just like there's seventeen Supreme Court cases trying to defund Planned Parenthood or take away access to any sort of reproductive healthcare for women or ban transgender people from using the bathroom they want to use. Whatever it is, there's so many things but we're so preoccupied with not letting ALEC destroy organized labor and turn America into a right-to-work country that we don't have the capacity to focus issues that our members really do care about. That's the strategy, right? If we're always on offense, or, always on defense, we can't help our allies. It's fucking divide and conquer. It works.

RS: You're the communications person and mostly digital.

TH: Yes, a public affairs director is my supervisor. She's our communications director. And then there's me. I do digital. Mine is mostly external communications.

RS: So I'm interested because you were saying you were there when the message boards started. I'm interested in how you see your work in the union but also the

feminist movement stuff being affected by the rapid sort of shifts in social media and what you think about all of that.

TH: I love the internet. Unfortunately, I think it's also a place where it's really dangerous to be a woman. It's emotionally dangerous to be a woman on the internet. But it's also an amazing platform and it allows us to share messages that wouldn't get heard. I don't know. There's definitely a culture of people like me have this--. Maybe twenty years ago if I had been me now I wouldn't be--. I think there's a certain kind of person who likes a lot of attention and the internet has created this little pile of people who their goal is to achieve internet fame. Unfortunately, I think that that's taken over a lot of our interpersonal lives. I think there's a fine line about the good that it does—thank god we can run campaigns online and I love to be able to tweet to the media, I love having so much more access to so many more people--but there's so many terrible things that happen on the internet and it can crush people. I don't know.

RS: I read somewhere, a blog piece you wrote after you had surgery. Had you been blogging before that? Did you have a sort of regular--?

TH: I always want to blog. I have wanted to be a blogger. I've started blogs. I never follow up with them. I had my weight-loss surgery and it was a hard decision because I had been identifying as a body-positive, self-loving, happy, fat-person feminist. But I came to this decision that I had to do it for myself. I read another article on that website and it was shaming women who had had weight-loss surgery. That piece that I wrote was just a direct reactionary, you know. Just because I made a decision that you don't approve of, doesn't mean that I'm not a feminist or I'm a bad feminist. My way of looking at what feminism is has always been it means you can do what is good for you

because you make your own decisions. And if that means you are a girly-girl who fits all of the gender roles that have been assigned to you and you like it that way, that's awesome. If you don't fit into any of those roles, that's awesome, too. If you're fat and happy and you love your body, that is super-awesome. And if you're skinny and happy and you love your body that is super-awesome, too. And if you want to show your body to the world, whatever body that is, that is awesome, too. Whatever you want to do with yourself, fucking do it. That's what feminism is to me. And share that message. Fight for other women. Stand up for other women. Don't fucking hate other women and don't let gender or beauty standards or external pressure or whatever stop you from doing what is good and the best choice for you. No matter what kind of choice that is. When I am on a website that is supposed to be feminist and there's somebody shaming other women for anything--. I think that should be the first tenet of "Are you a feminist?" "Well, no. I shame women on the internet all day." Then I think not. I had to write it because I was also at this point--I think it had been about a year since I'd had my surgery or maybe nine months--and I had lost a significant amount of weight but not to where I am now. I was still fairly overweight. I was really struggling with finding other women who had had a similar experience as me who didn't come from hating their body and who didn't come from "I'm having this surgery so I can get skinny and all the men will love me and I can finally get married and have the life I always wanted." I came from a totally different place and I didn't find that voice on the internet. And that was the first time I really felt like I had something to say that hadn't already been said and that needed to be said and heard. People need to know that every woman doesn't lose weight so that other people will enjoy looking at them. So there it is. I just had to write it. I respect the person who

wrote the other article that I responded to. I respect her opinion. She wrote about how her mom tried to force her to have weight-loss surgery but then it went on to talk about how everyone who has weight-loss surgery is just giving in to all of these things. [She] made sweeping generalizations and really made me feel shamed for a decision that I had made about my own body. I believe that any decision I make about my body is my decision and it's none of your fucking beeswax. So there that is.

RS: And was there a conversation that started as a result of that? Did people respond and did you feel like you were heard?

TH: I did and I was really inspired and motivated by how much people responded. People who hadn't come from the same perspective as me, who hadn't had that experience but still were like, "Wow! That was really meaningful and I appreciate this new way of looking at that," because I think that people who don't have, who don't experience fatness but then also don't experience weight loss or weight-loss surgery, it's totally foreign to them, the whole concept. There is this unfortunate conception that people who have weight-loss surgery are taking the easy way out of being fat. So I think that helped to explain that to some people. It helped open some people's eyes to that; but it also, there were other women who read it who were like "Wow! I had weight-loss surgery and I went through the same thing that you're experiencing and I didn't know how to talk to about it and it's amazing to read somebody else who felt it this way." There were other women who messaged me, found me on Facebook and started sending me messages saying, "Thank you so much for writing that. I've been struggling with this decision because I don't physically feel well but I'm afraid that if I decide to have this surgery my fat-positive friends will disown me." I think it's heart-breaking to be someone

who struggles with your body your whole life. As much as you can be a body-positive, fat-positive, body-loving person, it doesn't change the way the world treats you as a fat person. It doesn't eliminate the amount of shame that you experience and internalize. To live your whole life like that and finally have a community of friends who accept you as you are and then to make the decision about your body and have them turn around and desert you over it, is just the most heart-breaking thing I can imagine. Luckily that didn't happen to me because I wasn't really involved in those communities of fat-positivity. I was really on the fringe. Reading other people's blogs but I never really participated in it. It's not like I had fucking Vergie Tovar over there being like, "Trisha Harms, I can't believe you had weight-loss surgery." No, it didn't happen to me because I'm not huge on the internet but I still felt like I'm not going to be welcome in that community now. And that's just like a minor part of-- I mean, I don't know how many women experience being a part of that online community and then having weight-loss surgery and then feeling spurned from it. Your life changes so much. The way people treat you changes so much. It's really difficult to have everybody's focus is your body for years. So to have that core group of people that you felt comfortable with, that you could trust, sort of just disown you is--I don't think it's very nice. It didn't even happen to me, but I know that it happens to people. I felt like somebody had to write about it. If you're standing up against shaming people for being fat, you shouldn't be turning around and shaming people for making decisions to not be fat. I always said to people before I went, "My health is none of your business. It's my business." My health is still nobody's fucking business. I see a lot of the logic that's used, that made sense to me and still makes sense to me, is then used against or not applied when somebody makes decisions that people don't agree with.

RS: So I want to move to a different topic which is, in addition to WESA, and we were talking about Minnesota being progressive and unique in some ways, it was also way out front in the gay marriage fight. We talked earlier about your struggling with your identity but I guess my biggest question is: is there a linkage between the women's movement, feminist community in Minnesota, and gay marriage? Were they allies? Was that part of the fight or not? Or were those two separate kind of movements?

TH: I'm not an expert on this because I was not active in the gay marriage campaigning. My take on it is that it was totally a white man's gay marriage movement. Poor queer people are not concerned about having the right to get married. They're concerned about having the right to not get fired for being gay on the job. Or having the right to not get beat up for being gay. Trans queer people of color, specifically, are worried about not getting stabbed on the street. This is super-weird for me to say because a year or two years after it passed I totally got gay married! And I loved it and it was great, but when this was happening I wrote a blog for the Women's Consortium when I was interning there that was, "You know what? This is not the fight that we need to be fighting. And all of you people who have the time and resources to be fighting for permission to get married better not turn around and walk away from this fight when you get this because there is so much more work to be done." Unfortunately, I don't know how much of that work is getting done. And I don't know how much that big group of gay-identified people with time and resources to put into that campaign have stuck around to help the people that still got left behind.

RS: I see what you're saying. So, do you identify with the--is the Wave terminology useful to you? Do you identify as a Third Wave feminist?

TH: Yes, I guess I would. I used to identify more as a radical feminist.

RS: What did that mean?

TH: I don't even remember because it's been so long since I studied Women's Studies. Radical feminists now tend to--I think of them more as Second Wave and being very trans-exclusionary. Third Wave to me is more of this whole do your own thing, speak up for yourself and speak up for other women. Be a slut if you want to be a slut. Do what empowers you and encourage everybody else to live that life too. Stand up and speak out when people are hurting other people. I definitely identify with that.

RS: Well, what do you see as the kind of biggest challenge for a feminist today?

TH: I brought this up earlier. Feminism cannot be a white movement. That means we're obsolete. Feminism needs to be not just speaking for other people but creating space for women who have been silenced to be heard finally. That is exemplified in this issue that Kenya is talking about with WESA didn't help Kenya's community like it should have. Organizations like the Women's Consortium need to be working harder to make sure that women like Kenya are at the table making the decisions, not just sitting at the table being silenced by the rest of us.

RS: Do you feel optimistic that that will happen?

TH: I think it's happening. I think the feminist movement has a PR problem, as a PR person. And I think it's coming from a lot of directions. There's men's rights activists. There's people like the podcaster Milo Yiannopoulos who travels the world holding town halls about how feminism is unnecessary and the oppression of women is a myth. I'll spell it out for you: M-I-L-O Y-I-A-N-O-P-O-U-L-I-S. Please look that up. I

recently organized a protest at the U to go protest him when he was in town. He always claims he can't find a feminist who is willing to debate him because they know he'll win every debate. But he's just a bully who insists that he wins. Similar to Donald Trump, you know?

RS: Did you debate him?

TH: No, I didn't. Nobody invited me. Nobody asked any feminists that I know to debate. He ended up having a debate, but it was mostly a talk with another anti-feminist public speaker.

RS: How was the protest?

TH: It was good. It was organized in collaboration with Students for a Democratic Society. It was on the U campus. I think there were about seventy-five people there. It was good. It got on the news. We've got people like that out there talking about how feminism is a piece of bullshit. And then we've got another group of people who need feminism who have not been represented by feminism and who feel alienated by it. And it's also really hard to be coming from a movement that is seen as a white movement and historically white and with money---. If you have time to do the women's movement, you have some resources available to you, generally speaking. It's really hard to come from that and not usurp anybody else's experience and not speak for people. Oh my god! [loud unidentified sound; laughter—cat had jumped on interviewer's back] Oh my god! I'm so sorry.

RS: That was hilarious.

TH: He just jumped on her back. Come on, Frank.

F1: Did he really? Oh, man. Sorry, I thought he was doing okay.

TH: Are your recordings usually this full of action?

RS: [laughter] Erin Parrish had a puppy who was equally, wanted to be a part of the story.

TH: I think it's happening. At the Consortium we've really been focused on not just being inclusive but on lifting up voices and actively working on policy issues that target under-represented groups of women. But it's a long road for sure. If women still agree that we still need feminism, which I do, this is something we're all going to need to work very hard on together. And it's going to be difficult and painful and complicated and slow because it's--. We can't undo all of that in six months.

RS: Is there anything I didn't ask you about that you think we should talk about? Or that you want to get into the record?

TH: I don't know. I'm glad that we talked about the weight-loss surgery. That's probably my biggest thing that I like to talk about.

RS: Alright. Well, thank you very much.

TH: Sure. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW