

Raquel Willis  
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins  
Interviewer

The Transgender Oral History Project  
Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies  
University of Minnesota

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The Transgender Oral History Project of the Upper Midwest will empower individuals to tell their story, while providing students, historians, and the public with a more rich foundation of primary source material about the transgender community. The project is part of the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota. The archive provides a record of GLBT thought, knowledge and culture for current and future generations and is available to students, researchers and members of the public.

The Transgender Oral History Project will collect up to 400 hours of oral histories involving 200 to 300 individuals over the next three years. Major efforts will be the recruitment of individuals of all ages and experiences, and documenting the work of The Program in Human Sexuality. This project will be led by

Andrea Jenkins, poet, writer, and trans-activist. Andrea brings years of experience working in government, non-profits and LGBT organizations. If you are interested in being involved in this exciting project, please contact Andrea.

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1 Andrea Jenkins -AJ  
2 Raquel Willis -RW  
3

4 AJ: So, hello.

5 RW: Hi.

6 AJ: My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History Project  
7 at the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota Libraries. Today is June 7, 2017, and I  
8 am in Madison, Georgia, with Raquel Willis. How are you today, Raquel – this evening?

9 RW: I'm good, I'm excited.

10 AJ: Yeah. Wow, well I am so thrilled to be able to sit down and talk with you. I know, I've been sort  
11 of following you a bit on social media and all of the advocacy work that you do. It's just a  
12 pleasure to be able to turn my camera on and have a conversation with you about your life. So,  
13 to just get us started, why don't you state your name, spell your name so we make sure we have  
14 the correct spelling, tell me what your gender identity is as you define it today, and your gender  
15 assigned at birth, and your pronouns.

16 RW: OK. I am Raquel Willis. My pronouns are she/her/hers. I am a transgender woman, I'm queer,  
17 I'm from Augusta, Georgia, so we are in my home state of Georgia. I very much identify with the  
18 south and I am a writer, an activist. I call myself a media maven because I express myself in so  
19 many different ways – social media is one way. I am a podcast host for Black Girl Dangerous.

20 AJ: Really?

21 RW: Yes.

22 AJ: Wow, I love that podcast.

23 RW: Oh, thank you. And, a public speaker. So, all of these different things kind of work together to  
24 form what I do.

25 AJ: Did you tell me your pronouns?

26 RW: Yes, I did it out of order – I said my pronouns right after my name.

27 AJ: OK, got it. All right. Well, thank you. You didn't add your other latest professional title.

28 RW: Oh, right, OK. So, I also work at the Transgender Law Center. It's headquartered in Oakland,  
29 California. It is the largest trans advocacy organization in the United States – probably in the  
30 world, but definitely in the United States, and I am a national organizer.

31 AJ: Wow, that's a big job because this is a pretty big country.

32 RW: Definitely.

33 AJ: Wow, congratulations.

34 RW: Thank you.

- 1 AJ: So, you were born in Augusta, Georgia. Tell me about your earliest memory in life, Raquel.  
2 What's the first thing you remember? And it doesn't have to be around your gender identity,  
3 but if it is, that's cool.
- 4 RW: So, my earliest memory would be when I was three years old. I think it was the last day of K-3 . .  
5 . so before kindergarten they have like K-3, K-4 and then kindergarten is K-5; it's supposed to  
6 correspond with ages, but my age was always kind of off of that scale because I have a later  
7 birthday. It's in May, so it was actually two weeks ago . . . yeah, about two weeks ago. So, you  
8 know anybody who is summer to fall, their birthday . . .
- 9 AJ: Their school start gets kind of crazy.
- 10 RW: Yeah. So, my earliest memory is the last day of K-3, I'm pretty sure. I fell and scraped my knee  
11 and I still have the scar. I remember the . . . I guess we called her the principal, I don't know  
12 how that actually fits with a child development/pre-school kind of thing. She came out and gave  
13 me a Band-aid and was very nice and nurturing, my mom was right there with me. Yeah, it was  
14 just cool. I think I remember it because it was one of those instances where I realized that  
15 somebody other than my parents, or family, could be nurturing and care for another person.
- 16 AJ: I thought you were going to say it was the first time you registered pain. I remember scraping  
17 my knee and it hurt so, so, so bad and I had an uncle . . . you took me back to a memory too. I  
18 was about five and I scraped my knee and was like, "Oh, my God – pain." So, this was in  
19 Georgia, I take it.
- 20 RW: Yeah, so in Augusta. My mom worked at Augusta Technical College, so the child  
21 development/pre-school day care center was a part of that and, of course, the employees there  
22 would, you know, take advantage of it. And so, I kind of went through that before I went to  
23 actual grade school.
- 24 AJ: Oh, wow – that's good.
- 25 RW: Yeah. And so, my mom was an educator for, I think, almost 30 years.
- 26 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 27 RW: Yeah, and she retired about two years ago. I just remember that so vividly because I was always  
28 with her after school when I was really young, or after my pre-school. It just was a fond  
29 memory.
- 30 AJ: Yeah, that's a beautiful thing. What was your home environment like? Your mom was an  
31 educator. What did your father do?
- 32 RW: My dad worked for the government. So, when I was really young, he worked at this place called  
33 Liquid Carbonic. I don't quite know what he did because he wasn't working there after I was a  
34 bit older. So, you know, when you're growing up, your parents have jobs and you're like, "Oh,  
35 they do this," but it's not really what they do – it just makes it sound easier to say. But, I know  
36 once my dad started working for the city government, in the big municipal building in Augusta –  
37 because there are only so many tall buildings there, he was like an inspector and so he would go  
38 around and inspect like county equipment and he would do training, he would do defensive

- 1 training – like defensive driving training of people who operated the vehicles through the  
2 county. So, he taught me how to drive. Driving was a big thing, because in the south everyone,  
3 for the most part, drives or has to know how to. And so, that was always a big thing. So, I have  
4 fond memories of my dad teaching me how to drive a stick shift and driving me to the top of a  
5 hill and basically getting out – stopping it and having me get in and working on the gear shifts.
- 6 AJ: What?
- 7 RW: Yeah, in his red Camaro – his 1999 red Camaro. And, I just remember . . .
- 8 AJ: How old were you?
- 9 RW: I was a good 15; I was 14 or 15.
- 10 AJ: So, this was the time that you should be learning how to drive? You weren't five.
- 11 RW: No, it wasn't like in really, really country areas where people start driving at like 12. Or, because  
12 they're using tractors and stuff like that. Augusta is medium-sized, it's not that small. It's  
13 actually . . . it's the second most populous city in Georgia.
- 14 AJ: In Georgia, yeah.
- 15 RW: People don't usually know that.
- 16 AJ: Yeah, behind Atlanta.
- 17 RW: Atlanta, yeah.
- 18 AJ: So, it's pretty populous in Augusta. What's the culture like? What's the political climate like?  
19 It's in the south so it's probably heavily Christian, I would assume.
- 20 RW: Heavily Christian. I was raised Catholic actually. The funny thing is, I feel like I was only raised  
21 Catholic because my dad went to a Catholic school growing up. In some communities back in  
22 the day, that was the best education in the area was through Catholic schools or some kind of  
23 religious-affiliated school. And, so he went to this Catholic school and just stayed with it, and  
24 then when he had a family it was just . . . actually my mom converted to Catholicism and she  
25 actually became the one who was heavily involved and he, as she tells it, wasn't that religious.  
26 And then later on in his life he became more involved and we were a church family. My dad . . .  
27 actually, it's kind of funny because we would kind of joke that he should become a deacon,  
28 because we were always at church. My parents were my confirmation teachers. In Catholicism,  
29 confirmation is the huge kind of process of becoming a fully-realized adult in the Catholic Church  
30 and basically saying, "I choose this faith." I remember, this was going into 9<sup>th</sup> grade for me, I  
31 remember I knew I was not Catholic, I didn't subscribe to Christianity in the way that my family  
32 did at a young age. I mean, I knew that at a young age I was always sitting there dissecting  
33 everything that the priest was saying – even the things that weren't LGBTQ related. So, I just  
34 had so many issues. I didn't understand why women couldn't be priests, I didn't understand  
35 why there was no gender equality in the Church, I didn't understand why homosexuality was  
36 such a horrible thing – they didn't even talk about trans people, that wasn't even on their radar.
- 37 AJ: Oh, wow.

- 1 RW: So, I knew at a young age, so when I was going through the confirmation process it was really  
2 awkward because I really wanted to be honest and say, "This actually isn't my conviction." But,  
3 my parents were the confirmation teachers and I knew I had to save face because I couldn't be  
4 the one lone youth in the Church who was like, "No, I'm actually not going to do this," and my  
5 parents are heavily involved in the Church. So, I was like, "Oh, I'll just go through it, it's fine –  
6 whatever."
- 7 AJ: Did you have siblings?
- 8 RW: Yes. So, I have two older siblings. My sister is the oldest, she's 12 years older than me.
- 9 AJ: OK.
- 10 RW: And my brother is the middle kid, and he's nine years older than me. So, I was pretty close to  
11 my sister . . . I would say very close to my sister, we have a pretty close-knit family, and always  
12 have. But, my relationship with my brother, for most of my life, was strained. He was kind of a  
13 bully to me. He would pick at me and bully me a little bit – not like beating me up or abusive in  
14 that way, but just tease me.
- 15 AJ: Hard teasing.
- 16 RW: And the dynamic was so weird because he was so much older – he's like nine years older than  
17 me. So, I had a chip on my shoulder about him really up until . . . I would say a good two years  
18 ago.
- 19 AJ: Do you think the teasing was around your gender identity at all?
- 20 RW: I don't think he could name it, because I couldn't name it. I think my family just wasn't  
21 equipped to name gender identity differences or sexual orientation differences. I mean, they've  
22 all been to college. My parents both had master's degrees; my mom had a doctorate in  
23 education. My dad actually had a master's in philosophy or psychology, but it's still, I think, the  
24 context of being Black and southern – it just didn't register to them that they could have a queer  
25 trans child. And even if it had, I don't know if they would have known that there were resources  
26 out there or have the support in Augusta to let me be myself as early as I could have been.
- 27 AJ: So, there were . . . wow, now the question just blew out of my head.
- 28 RW: I know, we're all over the place.
- 29 AJ: I know. This is so, so rich. But, people can tell, or people have a sense of, you know, their child  
30 is effeminate, their child is a tomboy.
- 31 RW: Yeah, so I feel like my dad . . . I think they just knew I was different. I think they realized that I  
32 was so different that it could be harder for me later on if they didn't nip it in the bud. But, I  
33 don't think . . . I also don't think that they would have named it even if they thought it – right?  
34 So, I definitely dealt with a lot of bullying outside of the house.
- 35 AJ: OK.

- 1 RW: Like once I got to a certain age with the neighborhood kids and they realized, “Oh, actually,  
2 you’re really different and you’re really effeminate and like a girl.” They would always say,  
3 “You’re like a girl, you’re such a girl.” I actually got that before people started calling me gay.
- 4 AJ: Really? So, your family had to have seen this.
- 5 RW: They didn’t.
- 6 AJ: They’re very educated people.
- 7 RW: They didn’t.
- 8 AJ: No.
- 9 RW: My dad would always caution my mom about babying me, which is basically being too soft with  
10 me, being too forgiving of me, being too gentle, too affectionate – all of those things. So, he  
11 saw that and he was constantly trying to get me to be involved with sports and butch it up. He  
12 would always say, “Dry them eyes, boy,” or not even that I cried that much, because I learned  
13 really early that was not OK.
- 14 AJ: That was not cool.
- 15 RW: But very much his words of like, “Walk like you know where you’re going.” All that kind of  
16 bravado, macho/masculine kind of . . . yeah, this kind of All-American like Black man he wanted  
17 me to grow up to be.
- 18 AJ: Yeah.
- 19 RW: I think, also, that he saw a lot of himself in me. I think we both were very . . . I won’t say very,  
20 but I think we both hated the idea of conformity, but he felt like even though he hated it there  
21 was nothing he could do about it – he had to blend in. So, I remember having conversations  
22 with him, because he wasn’t a big sports person – even though he wanted me to be involved  
23 with sports, he didn’t really watch sports. He would watch boxing, that was about it. He would  
24 sit on his little chair and every time the person he was rooting for would take a hit, he would be  
25 like, “Mmm.” He would jerk and twitch, which was so funny. But, that was the only sport that  
26 he was interested in.
- 27 AJ: Interesting.
- 28 RW: And, actually my grandma would tease my dad about being so hard on me about sports because  
29 he played football, I think, for a little bit and I also think he played basketball – my mom told me  
30 he played basketball a few weeks ago, for a little bit. My grandma would joke, “Yeah, your dad  
31 played basketball, your daddy played basketball, but he got hurt once and then he never went  
32 back on the field.”
- 33 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 34 RW: So, she would tease him about it and so maybe some of that came from him, maybe there was  
35 some insecurity around the things that he was never able to live up to or embody and he  
36 wanted different for me because he felt like it would be easier.

- 1 AJ: Sure.
- 2 RW: But, actually, I came out to my parents at . . . I came out to my mom at 14; I came out to my dad  
3 at 15, as gay.
- 4 AJ: As gay.
- 5 RW: At that time, because I thought that that's what it was.
- 6 AJ: Right.
- 7 RW: I didn't know anything trans . . . what that was. I knew who RuPaul was, but I also knew RuPaul  
8 was not a woman.
- 9 AJ: Yes.
- 10 RW: So, I actually came out to my mom first – and this had been years brewing. I knew by 6 or 7 that  
11 I was some kind of queer. I thought I was gay because everything was under the gay umbrella.
- 12 AJ: Right, exactly.
- 13 RW: But, I also remember I would cry myself to sleep praying that I could wake up and just be a girl  
14 or praying I could go back in time and just be born a girl. I remember saying to myself, "It would  
15 just all make so much more sense." I liked all the girl things, I only had best friends at a certain  
16 point who were girls and just felt so much more connected to them and more connected to  
17 femininity, to womanhood, to my mom, to my sister. Because all the men and masculine people  
18 in my life were always trying to box me into something, always trying to make me be something  
19 more instead of just accepting me as I was; whereas, all the women in my life, for the most part,  
20 were accepting – within reason. So, I came out to my mom in a car, at night. It was raining,  
21 which all of these things are . . . you're just asking for trouble. I came out to her and I'm crying.  
22 I can't even get it out. I'm like, "I have to tell you something." I do that every time I have to say  
23 something hard – I load it up so that it will build up to a point where I have to say it.
- 24 AJ: Right, yeah – an explosion almost.
- 25 RW: Yeah, like I need the other person to dare me to say it so I finally say it.
- 26 AJ: "Just say it."
- 27 RW: "Just say it." I was like, "I have something to tell you but I don't want you to hate me. I don't  
28 know what to do," and all this stuff. And she was like, "Well, baby, just say it. I don't know what  
29 it is but you need to just say it. Obviously, you need to get it off your chest." So, we're going  
30 back and forth and back and forth for like 5 or 10 minutes and I'm like, "I'm gay. I've always  
31 known," and all this stuff. She's like . . . she is always calm under pressure. Anytime I fell or I  
32 scraped my knee or one time I backflipped accidentally off of a golf cart and tore up one of my  
33 fingers, I thought it was going to be broken. She's completely calm. She's like, "Well, you know,  
34 this will just be something we have to work through," and just so calm through it. So, I go into  
35 counseling; she finds this counselor but he's a religious counselor.
- 36 AJ: Oh, wow.



- 1 RW: I didn't blame her. I was like, "OK, well maybe this won't be so bad, I'll give him a chance – he  
2 couldn't possibly be homophobic he's a counselor, he's had training." So, I'm talking to this guy  
3 for about a year and I'm divulging all this information, telling him all my feelings and everything  
4 and he's affirming the whole time. Completely affirming, doesn't say anything negative, he's  
5 like, "Oh, you should work on this, you should try this, da-da-da-da." I come out to my dad a  
6 year later because . . . I was constantly being asked at school, "Are you gay?" Once you get to  
7 high school it's less, "You're gay," it's more, "Well, are you gay? When are you going to say  
8 something? When you going to tell people?" At this point, obviously.
- 9 AJ: Everybody knows but you.
- 10 RW: Right. And, I'm like . . . I'm over here looking like I've got egg on my face because I know this, at  
11 that time, was the truth for me – or what I thought was the truth. And, so I'm sick of all these  
12 questions and I talked to my dad and I . . . I'm basically gathering him in the room, my mom is  
13 like . . . she wants me to wait until college to tell him. And in my head, I'm like if I wait until  
14 college if it's a bad reaction, he won't be forced to work through it with me.
- 15 AJ: Right – right, because you'll be gone and . . .
- 16 RW: I'll be gone. But, if I'm still in high school . . . I knew my parents weren't going to be the ones to  
17 disown me.
- 18 AJ: Right.
- 19 RW: I just knew that that wasn't them. So, I said, "I've got to tell him now, because I've got to come  
20 out at school because I don't want to live the rest of my high school years, the two years I have  
21 left, looking foolish, feeling foolish, feeling ashamed." And I know that there are so many other  
22 LGBTQ kids at school who are not out, who maybe this could be something – that I could do  
23 something for them so they don't have to suffer the way I'm suffering, because I was so  
24 depressed. I got my dad in a room, my mom was sitting watching TV on the couch in what we  
25 called our den, which is basically our living room – it's connected to the dining room area. I  
26 actually sat down and told my dad – same thing, set him up, "I've got something to tell you."  
27 And I'm so scared – this is the man who has been trying to butch me up, make me be a certain  
28 way, my entire life.
- 29 AJ: You're about to break his heart.
- 30 RW: I'm going to confirm everything that he did not want me to ever become.
- 31 AJ: Right.
- 32 RW: So, basically, I tell him, less back and forth this time, because at the very least I have my mom's  
33 support. I come out to him. He's not initially . . . whatever, he's just like, "Ahh, I think it's a  
34 phase, whatever." He goes down the . . . I guess there's some kind of rulebook out there, all the  
35 clichés that your parent will say. "Well, it's just a phase, you'll grow out of it." I'm like, "Did you  
36 grow out of it? Did you go through this and you grew out of it? How could you even say  
37 anything like that without having experienced this?"
- 38 AJ: Right.

- 1 RW: We go back and forth, I'm starting to get more heated, and actually more emoted, that this is  
2 true – this is it, you can't talk me out of this, you can't tell me about an experience that you  
3 don't know anything about.
- 4 AJ: Right, and you had been through therapy already.
- 5 RW: And so, we get to a point and I'm like, "And, I also need to come out at school," because they  
6 did not want me to come out at school, they didn't want anyone to know. It was a reputation  
7 thing – the Church and all that stuff.
- 8 AJ: Yes.
- 9 RW: And I'm like, "I really need to come out at school." And I'm not really asking them for  
10 permission, I'm asking for a blessing – or like, at least telling them so that I can be untouchable  
11 once I do it. That makes him angry, he breaks this wooden chair.
- 12 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 13 RW: And . . . yeah, I still remember . . . like at Thanksgiving and stuff, "Well, we're missing a chair."  
14 This is the chair that has the handles on it – the two end chairs are different.
- 15 AJ: His chair, most likely, right?
- 16 RW: His chair. And yeah, he throws it – or something. Not at me, but just enraged. And, I shut down  
17 for a few weeks. I iced them out completely, don't talk to them at all. I go to school, don't talk  
18 to anyone for the most part. One of my teachers, she was really cool, was really worried about  
19 me. I talked to her about it, I talked to the guidance counselor. And then, I'm like . . . and then  
20 one day my dad, a few weeks later, he's like, "Come outside with me." And so, I go outside, it's  
21 like dusk – the sun is going down, there's a little breeze, this is like . . . I guess, about late  
22 February or early March. We're just looking out into the sky and we're talking and he's like,  
23 "You know, I know you're going through a lot, da-da-da-da," and he is like, "I know it's difficult  
24 and so we're . . . he's talking, I'm not talking to him, he's talking at me – and being  
25 understanding, he understands it's sensitive and all of that stuff, and I think to an extent he  
26 understands that this isn't something that is like a light switch or whatever. But, I do think that  
27 he still thought that I would grow out of it and that it would be a phase. And, you know, I just  
28 started breaking down and crying. He comes over and holds me in a way that he had never  
29 done once I was older. I don't remember my dad hugging me and it wasn't like the bro hug or  
30 during the greeting portion of church. And then once that happened, I was just like, "You know  
31 what? I'm going to let this go with them and I'm going to come out at school anyway. If they  
32 find out, it's whatever – I can't take it back, it's fine." And I do, and high school is so much more  
33 glorious. People are like . . . of course, people were like, "Finally." But, now they can't hold  
34 anything over my head. So, yeah. I know you have a million questions and I just went off on my  
35 coming out story.
- 36 AJ: No, I love . . . one of my questions is, "my coming out story," and most people don't go that in-  
37 depth, so thank you so much.
- 38 RW: It's because I'm writing about it.

- 1 AJ: And it's beautiful. You mentioned you're a writer, what do you write?
- 2 RW: I enjoy writing personal essays. So, I like personal critical essays about society, about gender,  
3 social justice, feminism, race, all of that good stuff.
- 4 AJ: Wow.
- 5 RW: I secretly write poetry to myself.
- 6 AJ: Sweet.
- 7 RW: So, maybe one day I'll release something – we'll see. But, I would like to get into fiction at some  
8 point. Once I kind of get my story done and out in the format that I want, I would love to do  
9 fiction.
- 10 AJ: So, you're working on the manuscript right now?
- 11 RW: Yes, working on a manuscript, a collection of essays – kind of memoir style, kind of not because I  
12 want . . .
- 13 AJ: So, personal essays?
- 14 RW: Personal essays, yes.
- 15 AJ: Wow, well good luck. That sounds exciting, I can't wait to read it.
- 16 RW: Thank you.
- 17 AJ: But, I'm getting a little preview right now.
- 18 RW: You are, yes, which is why I went into so much detail.
- 19 AJ: Yeah, no – I appreciate it. So, to the extent that you feel comfortable, Raquel, what medical  
20 interventions have you pursued and/or plan to pursue in this gender journey?
- 21 RW: Well, I am not at a point where I'm OK to talk about surgeries, although I guess surgical  
22 transition has been a part of my process. But, I've been on hormones, of course, for most  
23 procedures you kind of have to – or you're expected to. I started hormones in college.
- 24 AJ: There are some benefits to it.
- 25 RW: Yes, I mean hormones are fine. For a long time, I was completely fine with just hormones. I  
26 started hormones in college, actually, at 21. I remember the whole process I was like trying to . .  
27 . it took me about six months to get to the point where I was like, "I'll do this, I need to do this to  
28 be the person I desire to be."
- 29 AJ: So, this first agonizing high school thing you told your parents you were gay, which is what you  
30 thought was going on at the time, when did you tell them you were trans?
- 31 RW: So, I told . . . so my dad actually passed away before I realized or could articulate my trans  
32 identify fully.
- 33 AJ: I'm sorry that your dad passed away.

- 1 RW: Thank you. So, he died when I was 19. I was in college, I had met trans people, mostly white  
2 trans masculine folks, trans men, so I really didn't know any other trans women of color – which  
3 is . . . I kind of felt cheated, or feel cheated, thinking about it because I didn't really have that  
4 mother figure – that trans mom figure, queer mom figure, that a lot of the girls have. But, I met  
5 them . . . and even then, it didn't register that, "Oh, this is what you are," because I'm not a  
6 white trans man. But, something in me understood, "Oh . . ."
- 7 AJ: The reality.
- 8 RW: The reality that oh, yeah, you are different than what you are born as, that makes sense. I don't  
9 know why that makes sense, but that makes sense. I actually started performing drag, because  
10 they were also drag kings, and I started performing drag and playing with gender. Eventually  
11 through that experience, I was like, you know – this is actually less performance, this is actually  
12 me it's just that the stage is the only place I can . . .
- 13 AJ: . . . can express that.
- 14 RW: Express that and let go. And so, I identified as gender queer for a little bit and then I was like,  
15 "You know, I'm actually just a woman, I'm just scared to say that and scared of the reaction." I  
16 told my mom, I was like, "You know, I'm questioning my gender. I'm going to go into therapy to  
17 figure this out." This was about two years after my dad passed and so, around the time my dad  
18 passed, I had been performing for, I guess, almost a year and then I kind of stopped because I  
19 was like I don't want to besmirch his legacy, I don't want to . . . you know, bring a bad reputation  
20 to the family. I thought, "I'm not going to question gender, I am just going to exist and make it  
21 work." And then it just got to be . . . once I got through the grieving process, I realized . . . I was  
22 like in a way I don't have to live up to his expectations anymore. I love my dad, we had a great  
23 relationship outside of him not getting my queerness. And, so I reconciled that and I was like . . .  
24 but also, the bigger lessons that he taught me were about living by my convictions and being my  
25 own person and not doing things just because everyone else was doing it. That was one quote  
26 he always said, "Don't do things just because everyone else is doing it."
- 27 AJ: I'm thinking about Beyonce's *Daddy Lessons*.
- 28 RW: *Daddy Lessons*, yes. And that's how I feel about people transitioning, transgender people. It  
29 takes a certain strength of conviction and faith in the south to say, "This is actually who I am  
30 despite what society has told me, what everyone – starting from the doctor that first saw me as  
31 I peeked out of my mama said." This isn't me, this is me – I know me. Me, is something that I'm  
32 going to define on my own terms and once I realized that, I was like, "I'm good, I can do this –  
33 and I need to do this and I can't live my life unhappy for everyone else."
- 34 AJ: Right.
- 35 RW: Even if I don't ever look the way I imagine myself to look or . . .
- 36 AJ: I just have to say, you are stunningly beautiful by the way.
- 37 RW: Well, thank you. But, you know, at the time when you're thinking about transitioning . . .
- 38 AJ: Right, you see none of that – no.

- 1 RW: It's such a leap to be like I actually don't care if I don't ever look like a cover girl or have the  
2 funds to do everything on my list.
- 3 AJ: Right.
- 4 RW: But I'm going to trust myself, that I know myself and that I will at least be happier in my own  
5 skin. It was the greatest, bravest, most amazing decision I ever made.
- 6 AJ: Wow, would you ever go back?
- 7 RW: No, I don't think so. And I've thought about that. I am a very indecisive person, I am so quick to  
8 change my mind.
- 9 AJ: You said your birthday was just a couple of weeks ago, so you're a Gemini?
- 10 RW: I'm a Gemini – oh, yes. But, with this, I have never been more sure. I've also never done more  
11 homework, more research, more soul searching for anything. The work that I've put into not  
12 looking a certain way or having a certain body, the work has been transforming the inside . . . is  
13 a blueprint for how I want everything else in my life to be.
- 14 AJ: Don't you love it when people . . . it probably doesn't have as much anymore, but people are  
15 like, "You need to pray," or, "Did you try God?"
- 16 RW: Yeah.
- 17 AJ: "Wow, that's a great idea. I never thought of that."
- 18 RW: Right.
- 19 AJ: I think, like you just so eloquently stated, trans people . . . it consumes you. It's all you think  
20 about. I remember having the same prayers as a child and tearful nights, like, "God, what's up?  
21 Why is this happening to me?"
- 22 RW: Right.
- 23 AJ: So, yeah, you just made me think of how people are like, "You should do this." Trust me, I've  
24 thought about all of those things and tried them, OK. Wow. So, what's your relationship like  
25 with your family now? I know your father has passed away, but your sister, your brother, your  
26 mom.
- 27 RW: It's amazing. My mom is completely supportive, she's actually been with me in Oakland – so, I  
28 live in Oakland, California. She's been with me the past few months and it's great. She sees me  
29 as I am. Even when I first came out to her as trans, she said, "This makes a lot more sense than  
30 you being gay."
- 31 AJ: Yeah.
- 32 RW: And I was like, "Well, that defies logic – that this is easier for you to understand." But, it was.  
33 She knew I had been performing and trying to figure out my gender and everything. And, to her,  
34 she's like, "Oh, well if you're a woman, then you're going to go X, Y, and Z." So, now it's a whole  
35 different script. We're constantly discussing and debating on learning the part. "You're a

- 1 woman so you're straight and you're going to this and X, Y, Z children." I'm like, "OK, girl – chill,  
2 chill, chill. Hold up, you've just thrown another script on me." But it's like . . . it's great.
- 3 AJ: That's what I'm trying to break out of, mama – the script.
- 4 RW: Right. So, she's amazing. Yeah, it's so cute – she got me this bookmark, actually, that was a card  
5 – kind of a card that had a saying on it, "To my daughter, da-da-da-da," and this whole poem,  
6 and it just shows like the transformation of . . . you know, when you do the work of yourself and  
7 you transform the self, that transformation spills out onto other people.
- 8 AJ: It does.
- 9 RW: And that consciousness change that I think a lot of trans people go through, although I know,  
10 obviously, a lot of trans people don't have family support, but it's guaranteed that at some point  
11 your transformation will transform another person for the better because you're being more  
12 authentically yourself.
- 13 AJ: And even, sometimes when families are not that communicated with people, but they have  
14 come to some changes in ways that they may not have without that presence being in their  
15 lives.
- 16 RW: Right. But, oh, with my brother and my sister, things are so good. I'm so much closer to my  
17 brother. He texts me a lot more.
- 18 AJ: Really? Oh, my goodness, that's amazing.
- 19 RW: The turning point, because when I first came out as trans he was not onboard whatsoever - and  
20 actually sent me a really nasty letter. But, it was my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, he called . . . he sent me a  
21 video, him holding my nephew – my nephew was like a baby, but first time ever, because for a  
22 long time he was calling me his sibling, he wouldn't . . .
- 23 AJ: Which is better than my little brother.
- 24 RW: Brother, yeah, but he wouldn't say my name, he would just use the first initial. He sent me a  
25 video on my birthday, he'd never done this – he hasn't done it since, actually, but he'll send a  
26 text or call or whatever. He sent me a video that said, "Hey, Raquel . . ." First time he's ever  
27 saying my name, so I'm like, you know, in tears that he got it – finally. And then, from then on,  
28 it's just been an upswing. It was awkward, the meetings were awkward, but I still put myself  
29 around him and extended family and now things are great. My sister is cool, I just had brunch  
30 with her the other day.
- 31 AJ: Nice.
- 32 RW: She's talking about work and she's asking me about dating, "Oh, are you dating anybody?" So,  
33 it's so good.
- 34 AJ: That's beautiful, yeah. I'm really thrilled to hear that. How did you come to the name?
- 35 RW: To Raquel?
- 36 AJ: Yeah.

- 1 RW: Ummm, so my drag name . . .
- 2 AJ: To your name, not the name.
- 3 RW: To the name . . . so, I actually . . . that was a process too because my performance name was  
4 Roxy and so I actually . . . it's funny, I still have some people who call me Roxy back home.
- 5 AJ: I see Roxy, like you're a Roxy. I know quite a few Roxys and you fit the mold.
- 6 RW: Well, thank you. And, even my family sometimes will call me Roxy, even though they never  
7 called me Roxy at the beginning of my transition until after I said Raquel and they were like,  
8 "Ahhh, what else can we call you?" So, because your family never wants to call you your official  
9 name.
- 10 AJ: Right, exactly- I know.
- 11 RW: So, yeah, I was like, "It's got to be an R." I went through and was like, "What sounds good?"  
12 Roxanna or Roxanne or Rochelle or all these different names.
- 13 AJ: But the "R" – you hit it. Because I think names have power and certain names have personality  
14 types and every R that you have mentioned so far, like you . . .
- 15 RW: Could have worked.
- 16 AJ: Yes.
- 17 RW: Yeah, I don't know what it was about the R.
- 18 AJ: Rochelle, Roxanna.
- 19 RW: Yeah, people call me . . . when they can't get the Q, it throws people off for some reason. But  
20 yeah, then I was like, "Raquel," I think it's Raquel, now how am I going to spell it. I would just  
21 write it over and over again with my middle name – I didn't change my middle name. Yeah, and  
22 . . .
- 23 AJ: Were you the girl in high school that made a little heart over letters and little flowers and  
24 daisies?
- 25 RW: No, but I did doodle, a lot. I would always doodle in the margins.
- 26 AJ: I was just looking at your signature and you have really beautiful handwriting.
- 27 RW: Thanks to my grandma.
- 28 AJ: Yeah.
- 29 RW: My dad's mom, she always talked about, "You have to have good penmanship." At like 5 and 6.  
30 I'm like, "Penmanship? That's such a big word, what does that even mean?" Teaching me  
31 cursive – she taught me cursive and how to write a check, all that stuff.
- 32 AJ: Because that's important.

- 1 RW: Especially in the south, I think a lot of people still write checks. My dad wrote lots of checks, my  
2 grandma wrote lots . . . always writing checks. It was so funny when I came of age because I was  
3 like, “Actually, a lot of places don’t take checks – how did you all do this?”
- 4 AJ: Well, that’s now.
- 5 RW: Yeah.
- 6 AJ: There was not a lot of credit card action in the Black community when your folks and your  
7 grandmother . . . yeah. I’m sure you know.
- 8 RW: That’s right.
- 9 AJ: But yeah, that was it – checks.
- 10 RW: And they would drop off bills in person.
- 11 AJ: Right, I know. I have some cousins in Chicago that still do that. I’m like, “Dude, why are you  
12 going to Sears on Saturday morning to pay your bill? Really? That’s what you do on Saturday  
13 mornings?” But hey, you know, that’s how it goes. Tell me about love and relationships and  
14 how that may have been impacted by your gender identity.
- 15 RW: Oh, gosh. So, I didn’t date at all in high school. I had plenty of crushes through middle and high  
16 school, even as a little person, but there wasn’t an opportunity. I was the only openly queer  
17 anything at my school and my school, granted, was a little bit smaller because it was like a  
18 magnet charter school, but it was also a fine arts school.
- 19 AJ: Oh, I thought you went to that.
- 20 RW: A fine arts/performing arts school called Davidson Fine Arts.
- 21 AJ: In Athens . . . no . . .
- 22 RW: In Augusta.
- 23 AJ: In Augusta, yeah.
- 24 RW: And I actually was . . . I actually was the only out person and I was like, “This was supposed to be  
25 like *Glee*.”
- 26 AJ: Right, exactly.
- 27 RW: Or *Fame* or whatever. It wasn’t. So, I came out – I was like, “OK, maybe some more people will  
28 come out.” We had a few girls come out as bisexual, but they weren’t really bisexual – they  
29 were just riding the wave.
- 30 AJ: Yes.
- 31 RW: Because, you know, for girls, they get street cred.
- 32 AJ: Street cred for being bi, right.



- 1 RW: But, at that time, as someone moving through the world not as a girl or seen as a girl, it was a  
2 scarlet letter in many ways. So, yeah, I didn't date. So, I got to college – I talked to a few guys  
3 but even on the few dates I went on with this one guy, who we later became just friends, it just  
4 felt weird – the dynamic was weird. I don't know . . . I wasn't a guy, so the expectations of how  
5 this would go just seemed weird and how he was interacting with me. Not in a like, "I need you  
6 to be chivalrous kind of way," or whatever, in a, "I'm not a man."
- 7 AJ: Right, he was trying to be homey and . . .
- 8 RW: Yeah.
- 9 AJ: And, you were like, "I need a man."
- 10 RW: So, the funny thing is, in that little cadre of trans men, I met this guy and around the time I was  
11 figuring out my gender identity, we started dating. And, he actually is the first person I was ever  
12 like, "I think I'm a trans woman."
- 13 AJ: Really?
- 14 RW: And I remember it so vividly. Yeah.
- 15 AJ: And he was a trans man?
- 16 RW: He was a trans man. He was younger than me by . . . I think he was like a year or two years  
17 younger than me. So, at that point I'm like 21 and he's like 19 . . . yeah. So, yeah, so we dated  
18 off and on tumultuously – we were young love, stupid people, so many different things going  
19 on, but us being trans wasn't an issue ever.
- 20 AJ: Right.
- 21 RW: It was actually very affirming to be in the early, early stages of my transition and be with  
22 someone who understood dysphoria, "I'm not feeling that today, don't touch me." "Let's try  
23 this out." And so, it's funny – when we first started dating, he was like, "Well, what should I call  
24 you?" I was like, "I don't know, because boyfriend doesn't make sense," and he was like, "Yeah,  
25 that doesn't make sense." I was like, "I guess girlfriend," and he was like, "OK." And then, from  
26 there, that was it.
- 27 AJ: So, were you dressing outside of performing?
- 28 RW: No, this was like . . . this was almost a year before I even started presenting as a woman. So,  
29 that was also cool too, that he just got it.
- 30 AJ: Right.
- 31 RW: Even though I didn't look . . .
- 32 AJ: Right, you didn't necessarily look . . .
- 33 RW: The part, I guess.
- 34 AJ: Yes.

- 1 RW: So, yeah, we dated off and on until I graduated – about two years. And then, after that . . . yeah,  
2 I dated another trans masculine person for about eight months. It was OK. They were also  
3 younger so it was also just very different points, because I was leaving college. I had just started  
4 going into the professional world and so, I was like I can't date somebody in college, anymore,  
5 it's just not working. And then, since then, I have not really had a serious relationship in years, a  
6 few years.
- 7 AJ: Really?
- 8 RW: Which a lot of people actually don't know. I actually keep my romantic stuff to myself just . . . I  
9 don't know, now that I have more visibility, I just don't want people to take advantage of what I  
10 have accomplished for myself, but also, I don't want to thrust somebody into having to feel like  
11 they have to be as visible as I am.
- 12 AJ: Sure.
- 13 RW: I just want parts of my life for myself. But, I've dated some – more casually, but nothing really  
14 serious in the last three or so years.
- 15 AJ: What's your sexual orientation? I know you said queer but sometimes that can be a political  
16 identity, sometimes it's a sexual identity.
- 17 RW: Right. So, I feel conflicted over this because I think it's slightly problematic, but when I started  
18 dating, the first real boyfriend I had, the trans man I was talking about earlier, I was like, "Well,  
19 OK, maybe I'm not this kind of mono sexual kind of person." My attraction is more queer, but  
20 I've always been attracted to men and masculine folks. And so, I was just like, "I'm just queer, I  
21 don't want to deal with labels." But now, as someone who gets read as straight a lot, because I  
22 also get read as cis pretty often which is so weird to me . . . it's just such a cognitive dissonance  
23 for me.
- 24 AJ: How does that feel? I mean you said cognitive dissonance, but say more because that is not  
25 something I hear from a lot of trans people. Maybe a lot of trans guys, white guys, they get read  
26 as cis, but even then, they're usually a little shorter.
- 27 RW: Yeah, well I think for me the goal was never to be cis or to even necessarily pass as cis. I would  
28 very much rather people know I'm trans and it's fine, it's not like an issue, than for me to  
29 eschew my transness.
- 30 AJ: Right.
- 31 RW: Because that's my journey.
- 32 AJ: And I'm not saying you, I'm asking how does it feel to have people read you as such?
- 33 RW: It's nice when I feel like I could be harmed.
- 34 AJ: Right.
- 35 RW: If I feel like the alternative is being harmed. It can be affirming in some ways, but I've done the  
36 work of not putting too much stock into that – because, again, it is very conditional.

- 1 AJ: Yeah.
- 2 RW: So, it's like – oh, wow, if I'm in the right light or in the wrong light, what are they going to say,  
3 "Oh, she looks a little masculine today." Whatever. So, I try not to put stock into that. And  
4 also, I think I often feel like I have an obligation to be more than someone who relies on  
5 privileges. So, with cis passing privilege, pretty privilege, it makes some things easier, a lot of  
6 things easier. But, I don't want that to define me.
- 7 AJ: Yeah. What do you think the relationship is between the L, the G, the B, and the T?
- 8 RW: And the T.
- 9 AJ: And, coming from a perspective of someone who is visibly advocating on behalf of transgender-  
10 identified people who are setting the agenda for the community.
- 11 RW: I am definitely not one of those people who wants to separate the letters of the initialism. I very  
12 much believe, actually, that a lot of the hardship and oppression that the Ls, the Gs, the Bs, the  
13 Qs, people who aren't a gender-identity minority face, are actually gender based most of the  
14 time. I think we actually have a lot more similarities than people discuss. Because often if you  
15 think of hate crimes, they happen because people perceive a different gender – because you  
16 really don't know somebody's sexuality unless you see them with somebody, see them in bed  
17 with somebody – whatever. Most of the times you're making assumptions about them and  
18 even when you say, "Oh, that person is gay," in a derogatory way, you're saying, "Oh, they don't  
19 conform to my ideas of what they should be gender-wise."
- 20 AJ: Yes.
- 21 RW: So, I very much believe they should be connected. I do think that, like every group or  
22 community, we face a lot of issues of the most privileged having the most power and the most  
23 resources and the most pull to make decisions, so that often is white LGBTQ people. It's also  
24 almost all of the power goes to cis people in our community, who still aren't necessarily on top  
25 of understanding their privilege – and on top of figuring out how to work on the deeper issues  
26 that affect the most marginalized in our community. And, that's a problem, because you better  
27 believe if white cis gay and lesbian folks were overwhelmingly . . . and the ones with the power,  
28 were overwhelmingly homeless or knew homeless queer folks were experiencing actual job  
29 discrimination, like actually couldn't get a job – not just that they were passed up by a straight  
30 person . . .
- 31 AJ: Right.
- 32 RW: . . . couldn't navigate safely through public places, we would have a completely different  
33 community. We have not prioritized – they have not prioritized the most marginalized. So,  
34 that's why we still see these high suicide rates, all these murders, all of this lack of access to  
35 healthcare, to this legislation – because they slept on it. They could have been working on this  
36 while they were working on marriage equality. We could have ENDA here if trans people hadn't  
37 been thrown under the bus time and time again. So, although I'm interested in moving beyond  
38 the anger and the bitterness that many of us so rightly feel, we have to engage that  
39 conversation head on and really talk about it, especially at these larger LGBTQ orgs that hold

- 1 power and still are dragging, for lack of a better word, their asses on the rest of these issues.  
2 Like, where is your strategic plan on homelessness? On how HIV – we’re seeing increasing rates  
3 of HIV transmission, where are your strategic plans on all of that, like you had this 20-year  
4 mapped out plan for marriage equality?
- 5 AJ: Right. Wow. Very well stated. Given that, and given that we’re getting very close to the end of  
6 our time and your voice . . .
- 7 RW: It’s going. I’m so sorry.
- 8 AJ: What do you think is the future for the trans community?
- 9 RW: The future.
- 10 AJ: Where do you see the community in 50 years?
- 11 RW: Oh, in 50?
- 12 AJ: Yes.
- 13 RW: I think in 50 years, we won’t still be battling legislation in the way that we are now. We will see  
14 unprecedented numbers of trans folks, we will have data on those trans folks, we’ll have power  
15 in numbers. I think that people will understand that trans people give a glimpse into this larger  
16 future in which there is actual gender equality, and actual gender equality to me – or what  
17 gender liberation is to me, is the abolition of these binaries. I think we’ll see more people . . .  
18 you know, we might even not be using the same labels anymore. The labels might matter less  
19 because even cis people will be positively affected by how expanded we’ve made their  
20 opportunities and options of living to be. I think there will be less gendering of our children,  
21 which will lead to more and more generations of people not being boxed in and held back, less  
22 little boys who are told that they can’t cry or have less emotional intelligence – who can be soft  
23 and affectionate, all of that stuff. Less girls told that they have to be subservient and bow down  
24 to the patriarchy and masculinity. And more non-binary folks who really see themselves  
25 reflected in the world. I really believe that non-binary folks are the future.
- 26 AJ: Wow.
- 27 RW: I believe that that is the goal, is for us to get to a point where these labels actually matter much  
28 less, because I think when non-binary people give a glimpse of themselves is this future in which  
29 we actually ask every single person who they are on an individual level, instead of saying, I’m a  
30 woman and you automatically listing out this whole category of my existence of all of these  
31 things that you can ascribe to me – that’s bullshit.
- 32 AJ: Right.
- 33 RW: But non-binary folks are like, “Fuck that, I’m actually in my own column and category, you need  
34 to ask me about X, Y, and Z to actually know who the real me is.” I think that is the future.
- 35 AJ: Wow, that is probably the most succinct and clear-eyed answer to that question I have ever had.
- 36 RW: Well, thank you.

- 1 AJ: Raquel, thank you so much for this opportunity to get to know you a little bit better, to  
2 document and preserve a little small piece of the Raquel Willis story, about an hour's worth.  
3 But, we do get a limited amount of hours on this planet. I'm very thankful for you being willing  
4 to share one of those with me.
- 5 RW: Of course, yeah.
- 6 AJ: Thank you so much.
- 7 RW: Yeah.
- 8 AJ: Peace.
- 9 RW: Peace, and afro grease.