

Toni-Michelle Williams
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins
Interviewer

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

June 7, 2017



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 Toni-Michelle Williams -TMW
3
- 4 AJ: So, hello.
5 TMW: Hello.
- 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.
- 9 TMW: Woot-woo; woot-woo.
- 10 AJ: And, today I have the honor, the pleasure, the joy to interview Toni-Michelle Williams. Hi, Toni.
- 11 TMW: Hey, Andrea.
- 12 AJ: How are you?
- 13 TMW: I am doing so great today.
- 14 AJ: Really? Wow.
- 15 TMW: Yes.
- 16 AJ: Well, it has been a beautiful day.
- 17 TMW: Yes, beautiful sessions and discoveries and adventures.
- 18 AJ: Toni, just to get us started, can you state your name, spell your name so we make sure we're
19 spelling everything correctly, tell me your gender identity as you define it today, your gender
20 assigned at birth, and your pronouns.
- 21 TMW: OK. My name is Toni-Michelle T-o-n-i hyphen Michelle, M-i-c-h-e-l-l-e, last name Williams, W-i-l-
22 l-i-a-m-s. My pronouns are she, hers, and beautiful, and I . . .
- 23 AJ: She, hers, and beautiful?
- 24 TMW: Yes.
- 25 AJ: All right.
- 26 TMW: And, I identify as a Black woman who is blessed to have an experience, a trans experience. I also
27 identify as a magical unicorn.
- 28 AJ: A magical unicorn, OK.
- 29 TMW: Yes, a magical Black unicorn. And, I identify as . . .
- 30 AJ: Your pronouns?
- 31 TMW: Well, my pronouns – she, hers, and beautiful.

- 1 AJ: OK, oh yeah – I’m sorry, you already said that.
- 2 TMW: That’s OK.
- 3 AJ: So, magical Black unicorn, Black woman of trans experience.
- 4 TMW: Black woman. I’m blessed to have a trans experience.
- 5 AJ: Yes, got it – Black woman, I am blessed to have had a trans experience.
- 6 TMW: Yes.
- 7 AJ: Toni-Michelle, tell me what is your earliest memory in life? What’s the first thing you remember
8 in life? It doesn’t have to be about your gender identity, but if it is about that that’s fine, that’s
9 OK.
- 10 TMW: My earliest memory in life . . . it’s funny because I actually remember it, but it took a video for
11 me to remember it, but then I remembered it and then I remember how it felt to my body, and
12 it’s kind of like my gender story too.
- 13 AJ: Perfect.
- 14 TMW: So, when I was 5 years old, I’m trying to think was it 5 or 6, one of those birthdays. So, my
15 birthday is April 6th, my grandmother’s birthday is April 6th, and my great aunt, who is no longer
16 with me – which is my grandmother’s sister’s birthday, is April 6th.
- 17 AJ: Oh, wow – were they twins?
- 18 TMW: No, they weren’t – my grandmother was the second to the baby and then Aunt Louise was the
19 eldest, I think, out of my family who was from Alabama. So, we had a joint birthday party in
20 Atlanta and I remember my mama brought . . . I remember my mama brought the blue and
21 black Power Ranger, it was just the blue and black Power Ranger, and, of course, her memory
22 will go completely different, but my experience was that I was just so . . . I remember just crying
23 the whole time and everyone was saying, “Why are you crying, it’s your birthday? Why are you
24 crying?” It was just that I did not want the Power Rangers at the party. I was obsessed with
25 Power Rangers the show, but everybody, like my cousins, we all . . . they knew that it wasn’t
26 that I liked the Power Rangers, or even the pink Power Rangers, I was in love with . . . what’s her
27 name? I always forget it, I’m going to have to Google it, but the witch – the witch with the
28 Madonna bra and then the horn-like hat.
- 29 AJ: I’ve never watched it, it’s a different generation.
- 30 TMW: Right, if you know . . . you have to watch the video. But I was in love with her with them pointy
31 titties and I was like, “Yes, bitch, that’s me.” So, if I was going to be a Power Ranger, in my head
32 I just knew it was going to be her.
- 33 AJ: It was going to be her.
- 34 TMW: And, of course, it wasn’t. I just remember just . . . that was the moments that I felt like I couldn’t
35 verbalize, or I was afraid, to say the thing – it was like I was afraid to say what I wanted or what I
36 longed for or what I desired because I knew that it wasn’t what was expected or what was right

- 1 to the folks who were providing for me. So, that was my first . . . like my first moment of feeling
2 that . . . I also remember so many things, like when I mentioned the unicorn, but I can't
3 remember anything that happened yesterday, I can't remember anything that happened this
4 week or even last week, but I can remember things that happened 19 years ago – the day, the
5 time, how the air was, how people felt, what people had on, what music was playing on the
6 radio. I can give you the whole shebang.
- 7 AJ: That's pretty impressive.
- 8 TMW: Ain't it really pretty impressive. But, it blows too because I need to remember things from
9 yesterday.
- 10 AJ: Yes, that's kind of critical too.
- 11 TMW: That's kind of critical, but yeah. So, stories have always been really, really important to me.
- 12 AJ: Yeah? So, where was this birthday party? Where are you from?
- 13 TMW: I'm from here in Atlanta – well, this is not Atlanta, this is Madison, Georgia.
- 14 AJ: Yes.
- 15 TMW: But, I'm from Atlanta, which is like an hour and some change from here. I was born . . . I'm a
16 Grady baby, everybody in Atlanta will know what Grady babies are.
- 17 AJ: What is that name? A Grady baby?
- 18 TMW: I was born at Grady Hospital, Grady Memorial Hospital, which is the hospital downtown. If you
19 ever drive through the city you will see the big signs that say, "I wouldn't have made it without
20 Grady."
- 21 AJ: Oh, right.
- 22 TMW: It was a whole campaign that they had because at one point they wanted to shut the hospital
23 down and then they came up with this campaign, which was a really great campaign because it
24 was really true – for a lot of people in Atlanta, Grady saved a lot of lives.
- 25 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 26 TMW: And, they're not the best hospital ever but they saved . . .
- 27 AJ: But, that was what was available to people.
- 28 TMW: That was available for people, Black people.
- 29 AJ: Black people, right.
- 30 TMW: Especially in the city. So, yes, I'm a Grady baby, born here in Atlanta. I was raised on the east
31 side, which is this long stretch from the center of the city to where we are now in Madison, it's
32 that long stretch of the east side. And so, I'm from that stretch – so from downtown to Decatur
33 to Lithonia to Conyers to Covington, Georgia, to Madison, Georgia. I've lived from Covington to
34 Atlanta.

- 1 AJ: In all of those places.
- 2 TMW: Yes, in all of those places.
- 3 AJ: Where did you go to school?
- 4 TMW: I graduated from DeKalb School of the Arts, shout out to DSA – the Ants.
- 5 AJ: Wow.
- 6 TMW: It was a performing arts school.
- 7 AJ: The Ants?
- 8 TMW: The Ants.
- 9 AJ: Why were you . . . ?
- 10 TMW: We didn't have mascots because we were performing arts, but what we did have was a lot of
11 ants in the building all the time.
- 12 AJ: Oh, OK.
- 13 TMW: So we made that up. The red ants because we're in Georgia.
- 14 AJ: Those things will eat you up.
- 15 TMW: Baby, they ate us up – I got bit up today when I was out at the graveyard site. But yeah, so I
16 graduated from DeKalb School of the Arts. I focused on vocal and . . . well, musical theatre
17 pretty much.
- 18 AJ: Yeah, you have a beautiful voice.
- 19 TMW: Oh, thank you.
- 20 AJ: You're an amazing singer.
- 21 TMW: Thank you.
- 22 AJ: I hear you just walking down the halls singing and . . . do you perform? Are you onstage?
- 23 TMW: I don't, I don't perform. I dab in drag performance and the art of drag.
- 24 AJ: OK. When you do drag, do you sing live?
- 25 TMW: No, I don't. I'm terrified of my voice – or, I'm terrified of people hearing my voice.
- 26 AJ: Really.
- 27 TMW: But, that's a part of my new commitment to embrace all of my talents and my skills because it's
28 a part of me, it's a part of my resilience, and me walking down the hallway humming and singing
29 is what brings me back, it keeps me on earth pretty much, it keeps me safe so I just . . . I want to
30 embody that more in my everyday life.

- 1 AJ: I want to talk about your adult life, for sure, but I want to just learn a little bit more about you
2 coming up. Did you have brothers and sisters?
- 3 TMW: I was not thinking about my childhood. I went right over that.
- 4 AJ: You tried to run right over the top of your childhood.
- 5 TMW: Baby, it's not a good time – but it's all right. So, no, I'm the only child that my mommy has. My
6 mommy is a single mommy, she was a Grady baby too . . . I think . . . yeah, she was a Grady
7 baby. My daddy has four children. I'm the eldest and then it's my brother, Randall – we're
8 about three months apart, his birthday is June 20th.
- 9 AJ: OK, my sister's birthday is June 20th.
- 10 TMW: What? Oh my God. June 20th, then there's Ravé and Ravé lives in Ohio, that's my baby. I think
11 I've spent the most time. . . no, I've probably spent equal time between Randall and Ravé. Ravé
12 just graduated from high school, she's 18, she graduated last month, and she's so beautiful. She
13 looks just like my grandma and a little bit like my daddy, and I don't even know if she knows.
14 And then there was Tiana and Tiana is the baby of us and she is 17. And none of them ever met
15 my dad, I was the only one to meet my dad. My dad was murdered when I was 10.
- 16 AJ: Oh, no – I'm so sorry.
- 17 TMW: And so I . . . yeah.
- 18 AJ: So, that was a traumatic part of childhood, your father's murder.
- 19 TMW: Yes, it was a traumatic part of childhood. And, it's also . . . I try to lean toward the better
20 memories, because it was . . . it was hard. Those are one of the experiences where I remember
21 all of the things.
- 22 AJ: Sure.
- 23 TMW: All of the things from . . . I was in 5th grade when he was murdered. I was going to school at
24 Atherton Elementary, which just recently got demolished – like this year, I think, maybe last
25 year. But Atherton Elementary Theme School, it was off of Glenwood Road in Decatur and I
26 remember being in music class, in Miss Miller's class, and she was doing something and then all
27 of a sudden Miss Dumas and there was one other teacher I can't remember, but they knocked
28 on the door and they had a talk with Miss Miller and Miss Miller came back inside and called me
29 by my former name but just said, "Toni, they need you to go up front with your mom." And, at
30 the time, my mom worked at the same school I attended – she was the bookkeeper.
- 31 AJ: OK, so she worked at Atherton.
- 32 TMW: Yes, she was the bookkeeper at Atherton. And so, everybody . . . I don't want to say I was a
33 problem child, but I was the class clown because, you know, I love being silly.
- 34 AJ: You love to laugh.
- 35 TMW: I love to laugh – honey, you have to . . . oh, I just get so bored. And not even bored, I just get . . .
36 anyway . . . and so, everybody was saying, "Oh, you're getting in trouble, you gotta go with your

- 1 mama.” You know how kids are. And so, when I got out in the hallway, Miss Dumas and the
2 other teacher, I feel like it was another counselor or something – I cannot remember, my mom
3 would probably know. They just extended their hands out to me and they were really silent. It
4 definitely didn’t feel like I was in trouble, but it didn’t feel like when I got to my destination that
5 it would be good.
- 6 AJ: Right, that something was not right.
- 7 TMW: Right. And I was 10 years old and I just sensed that . . . felt that energy. They pulled me up, we
8 walked up the hill – there’s like a little ramp, or was a little ramp in the hallway that you would
9 go up and then you make a right to go towards the front of the school. And, I was thinking I was
10 going to the office but we stopped at Miss Everett’s room, she was a 3rd grade teacher. She
11 passed away a few years ago, but she was a short dark-skinned chocolate lady who loved me
12 and my mama to death. So, we got around the corner and I felt . . . I think I remember Miss
13 Dumas the most because I shared other space with Miss Dumas. Me and my mom would go
14 over there and I would play with her daughter and things or whatever. But, Miss Dumas’ energy
15 though was more extended to me and so I like . . . I just remember her the most. But, when we
16 crossed the corner, I could just feel her energy just like . . . she was just terrified and sad. And,
17 when I got around the door, I just saw my mama and she was just shaking her leg, she was on
18 the couch. My mama, she was heavy set, she was like 309 pounds, I think I shared that last
19 night. She had this little purplish-blue shirt, you remember those shirts that you put on that
20 stretched . . .
- 21 AJ: Yes, the little ruffles and . . .
- 22 TMW: Ruffle things, whatever.
- 23 AJ: Not ruffles but . . . ripples.
- 24 TMW: Scrunchies, yeah.
- 25 AJ: Scrunchies.
- 26 TMW: Yeah, so she had – grew up with those, honey, those little flip-flops.
- 27 AJ: The shirt would be about this big and then it will fit anybody.
- 28 TMW: It will fit anybody, yes. My mama had one of those, it was one of her favorite shirts.
- 29 AJ: A purple one.
- 30 TMW: A purple one. And, she had on these black slacks and these shoes that you used to stink so bad.
31 But, she was a single mama, she had me in fresh shoes that she paid herself – and I love her for
32 that. But, I just walked in the room and her eyes were just bloodshot red, bloodshot red, and
33 she just was shaking. She couldn’t tell me. They set me down and I immediately thought that
34 my great-grandmother had passed because my great-grandmother, Josephine, was like . . . since
35 this is a trans oral history thing, my breasts are named after my grandmothers and the women
36 in my life.
- 37 AJ: Each one has a different name?

- 1 TMW: Yeah, this is Josephine . . . this is Josephine, so I thought that my Josephine, and this is Mary Nell
2 who is my grandmother who shares my birthday. And, so Josephine, just two years before my
3 dad's murder, had three strokes back-to-back and she was completely paralyzed on her left side.
4 So, she was sick and we were taking care of her and all those things – and that's my mom's
5 grandma, so I immediately thought that she had passed. So, I was just like, "Mama." And tears
6 starting coming and all of that. I was like, "What's going on? Someone tell me." And, she
7 turned around and she just told me – I don't even remember how she told me, but I just
8 remember her telling me that somebody had killed my daddy. And, I think the hardest part
9 about it . . . I just remember being devastated, I just cried. We got to my grandma's house in
10 Decatur, off of Rainbow Drive, and I walked in and my grandma just looked at me and just broke
11 down and started crying. She just grabbed me and we just sat and just hugged – just sat and
12 hugged and my mama, I just remember her just standing there and watching, in her own way
13 extending . . . they had fractured relationships.
- 14 AJ: Right, because this was your father's mother.
- 15 TMW: Yeah, this is my father's mom, but what I didn't know . . . like before then, before that moment,
16 because their relationship was so fractured, my mom would be like, "Oh, you can't go over
17 there, you can't see them no more." And then my grandma and them would just be like hating
18 that when mama did that and . . .
- 19 AJ: "Let that child come over and see their family."
- 20 TMW: I know. And then, they used to hate my mom . . . my mom used to whoop me . . . she used to
21 beat me. She would say whoop me but it was really, really . . . it was a lot, from strangling me
22 with an iron chord.
- 23 AJ: Child abuse? Strangling you with an iron chord . . . I know you love your mama, but that's . . .
- 24 TMW: It's hard for me to talk about it, but it is what it is. But, it's . . . yeah, it was all of those kind of
25 things. So, my grandma and my granddad they just hated that. But it was in that moment that I
26 actually . . . it was the first time I saw my grandma's power, centerline wisdom thing – like her
27 dignity grow. And, it was the first time that I saw my mama really receive truth, receive love and
28 receive . . . I don't know, it was the first time I saw that exchange of Black women having an
29 understanding.
- 30 AJ: Wow, that's powerful.
- 31 TMW: My grandma said, "You're not taking him from me, he's all I got now." And she was talking
32 about me. And, my mama never did, my mama never did after that. It was just really, really
33 understood. And, in that whole experience, it's like the moments of me really getting to know
34 my power and knowing that I was different too – like at 10. Not only was school really, really
35 hard for me, little 3rd graders would jump me because the 6th graders would tell them to.
- 36 AJ: Why?

- 1 TMW: Because I was me, I was Toni-Michelle. I was Toni-Michelle and all of the friends, all of the girls,
2 they all were my friends and my best friends, they loved me. I thought the boys had cooties, I
3 did not want to play with them – they did not want to play with me so that was even better.
- 4 AJ: Right.
- 5 TMW: I was like, “Get away from me, I don’t want to sit with you anyway.”
- 6 AJ: So, you were pretty effeminate, would you say?
- 7 TMW: I was pretty effeminate, and I was really . . . but it was conditional, if that makes sense. So, it
8 was like I knew how to . . .
- 9 AJ: Butch it up or . . .?
- 10 TMW: I didn’t necessarily know how to butch it up, but I knew how to silence myself.
- 11 AJ: OK.
- 12 TMW: I knew like when I was around my family I was just not going to say nothing.
- 13 AJ: Don’t say anything.
- 14 TMW: Right, because if I opened my mouth it was going to sound like a girl. You know what I’m
15 saying? So, I’m just not going to say nothing if they ask me, I’m just going to get into the mode
16 of doing what they tell me to do, just hold it in. Because even if it comes out and it comes out as
17 anger, it’s going to be like a girl. And, I even remember there was one time where my mama, I
18 got in trouble at school – just because I used to talk all the time, like I said it was conditional –
19 because when I was at school it was a whole other story. I would cuss folks out and all those
20 things. But, it was just so different and that’s why I think . . .
- 21 AJ: So, they called your mom . . . you were going to say that one day you were at school and they
22 called your mama.
- 23 TMW: What was I . . . they called my mama. Oh, so many times . . . I forgot what I was going to say.
24 But, yes, there were so many times when they called my mama. Even over the intercom, “Miss
25 Ponder, Toni is down here talking and being the class clown.” Mama would come down there,
26 “I’ll knock you,” Everybody says, “Ahhh, Miss Ponder is coming, on my God.”
- 27 AJ: What’s your mom’s name?
- 28 TMW: Ponder, Tijuana Ponder. My mama’s name is Tijuana Michelle Ponder, well now she got married
29 so it’s Tijuana Michelle Williams and so Michelle is her middle name, so Toni-Michelle was
30 adapted by my mama’s . . . well, Toni-Michelle was given to me by a friend in choir in college.
- 31 AJ: Really?
- 32 TMW: The combination, because it’s really just always been Michelle, and then the combination and
33 infusion of Toni-Michelle came together. Toni extends from my given name, my birth name, and
34 she gave me that. But, it was so perfect because my mama’s name is Tijuana Michelle.
- 35 AJ: Tijuana – like Mexico, Tijuana.

- 1 TMW: Yes, Tijuana like Mexico. So, Tijuana Michelle, Toni-Michelle, and yay.
- 2 AJ: But, this name was bestowed upon you.
- 3 TMW: It was bestowed upon me and thought through and influenced by Toni Braxton.
- 4 AJ: All right.
- 5 TMW: Because you know, Toni Braxton's middle name is Michelle as well so her name is Toni Michelle
6 Braxton.
- 7 AJ: And, from Atlanta.
- 8 TMW: Exactly – or Tennessee, I think she's from Tennessee. Yes, and I have a doggie, his name is
9 Braxton.
- 10 AJ: Oh, sweet. What kind of dog?
- 11 TMW: He's a blue-nosed pit-bull. He's my baby.
- 12 AJ: So, when did you first realize that you were not the gender you were assigned at birth, Toni-
13 Michelle?
- 14 TMW: It had to be at that birthday party moment too – definitely at that birthday party moment. I
15 think for the longest time there was just such a deep sense of . . . I can't really remember or
16 recall the exact moment because it was just really covered with a sense of shame – this sense of
17 shame. It was always like . . . what I always remember, always having lots of friends who were
18 girls always just not being safe or comfortable or understood by boys.
- 19 AJ: Even gay males?
- 20 TMW: Even gay males, even growing up . . . yes, especially gay boys because I was . . . and I say this
21 now when it comes to dating gay men, because I don't, because in my experience I was turned
22 down by so many gay men because I was a woman and they wanted a gay man. I was actually
23 told that by a dear friend of mine who I was in love with their ex-husband. I'm always telling my
24 best friend who I love so much. But, yeah, it was that. So, growing up it was like the gay boys
25 were like . . . they would be like, "Oh, you want to be a girl." Versus understanding . . . I just
26 never identified with queer or gay men or gay boys and things, I just always just . . . I guess
27 performed in those spaces. But, I never dated. I never really dated. I used to be in love with
28 little girls because . . . I'll give my mama this though, she used to love when I had a girlfriend, or
29 an infatuation with a girl. But, I had so many because I would be like . . . the narrative that was
30 going on in my head was what she would see, "Oh, you like that girl." It was like, ""Yes," but I
31 was saying stuff like, "I want to be her, she's amazing, she's me."
- 32 AJ: That's the one.
- 33 TMW: That's the one right there. And, I remember this one time where I loved to walk down to Piggly
34 Wiggly, which is a grocery store.
- 35 AJ: Right.

- 1 TMW: Nobody knows that.
- 2 AJ: Deep in the south, yes.
- 3 TMW: Piggly Wiggle and now Wayfield. But, I used to walk to Piggly Wiggly and get little . . . out of the
4 bubble gum machines, the little rings and necklaces and things that would be in the little quarter
5 slot.
- 6 AJ: Little quarter thing – yeah.
- 7 TMW: And so, I did that. I had seen *Days of Our Lives*, I loved soap operas . . . not anymore, but
8 growing up I used to watch soap operas with my grandmas, my great-grandmas. Soap operas –
9 all of them.
- 10 AJ: *Days of our Lives, All My Children.*
- 11 TMW: Mainly *Days of Our Lives, Passions, All My Children, and General Hospital*. It was later on that I
12 got into like *The Bold and the Beautiful* and all of those things or whatever. But *Passions, Days*
13 *of Our Lives, General Hospital, and All My Children* were the main four. On *Days of Our Lives*,
14 Sammy and Lucas . . . well Lucas had asked Sammy to marry him, this was when they were
15 teenagers . . . teenagers . . . yeah, they were teenagers. And, I saw the whole thing and so I
16 walked down to Wayfield and there was this girl in pre-school that I used to be in love with,
17 really infatuated with that little bitch. Her name was Brianna Williams and I used to be like, “Oh,
18 hi, it’s so easy for me to be here because we had the same last names.” And, I proposed to her
19 like Lucas did.
- 20 AJ: Really?
- 21 TMW: I did, I went and got her a ring and came back . . .
- 22 AJ: Gave her a little ring.
- 23 TMW: Yes, I also got expelled from pre-school for that experience – well shortly after that experience,
24 because the boys used to be like, “Oh, well, to prove that you’re a real boy, you have to touch
25 her private part.” And I was like, “I don’t want to touch her private part, that’s nasty.”
- 26 AJ: Right.
- 27 TMW: So, we were under the table and she was sitting there. I remember she had on red sweatpants –
28 she had on a whole little sweat suit. And they were like, “You’ve just got to touch her right
29 there.” She was sitting down. I was like, “No.” And they’re saying, “Well, you’re not a real boy
30 if you don’t do it, we’re going to beat you up.” So, I did it just like this. Nothing happened – she
31 squirmed, but that was it.
- 32 AJ: Right.
- 33 TMW: We went to sleep for nap time, we woke up . . . I remember being woke up and they were like,
34 “Toni, wake up – wake up, sweetheart.” I woke up and all I saw was Brianna crying in the
35 corner. I was like, “Oh, God.” I was like six years old and I was like, “Oh, God, this is about to
36 happen.” They called my mama – she whooped me and all this stuff. I was just so hurt . . . so,

- 1 yeah, that's what happened. And, I don't remember if I got expelled but I definitely know that I
2 wasn't able to come back for some time and I was really mad about that. But, I still have
3 pictures from my whole pre-school years because I was crowned . . . I was a part of the royal
4 court in pre-school and was . . .
- 5 AJ: So, you were always a performer, huh?
- 6 TMW: I was a performer, I was cute.
- 7 AJ: When did you come out?
- 8 TMW: I came out as trans . . . I don't like to say came out . . . so, there were things that led up so I don't
9 . . . I came out in high school first to my friends, like Jasmine Dyree, Rob Burr, Alycia . . . I came
10 out to all those folks when I was 15, in 9th grade. Morgan Harrison . . . and then I came out as
11 trans like when I was . . . I didn't have language for it for the longest time, so I always talked
12 about it, always . . . I remember dressing up for gender-cross day for high school and I came
13 through – I was with Kimberly Waldon, I went to her house – shout out to Kim, who is in the Bay
14 area now. But, shout out to Kim – I went to her house, their parents used to love me and they'd
15 let me go there and play with all the girl's clothes and just do all of those things so I never went
16 home.
- 17 AJ: Wow.
- 18 TMW: So, I went to Kim's house and she gave me some shoes, she gave me some clothes and I was
19 going to go to Alycia's house because I couldn't sleep over at Kim's house because her daddy
20 wouldn't allow it. But, Alycia – I could always have sleepovers with Alycia. And so, I would go
21 over to Alycia's house and put on . . . I got myself together, her sister did a little make-up. I
22 remember I was scared because I had just started growing a little peach fuzz and I was like, "If I
23 just take it off . . ." I was just so dysphoric. I was like, "If I take it off, everybody is going to see
24 that I'm a girl. I don't know what this is going to mean." I was just so fearful, I was terrified. I
25 know now where that comes from – especially thinking about the relationships that I have, like
26 with my uncles and folks like that that I have in my life. But, yeah, I came out . . . actually that
27 was after, because that was my senior year so I was already out but that was the first moments
28 that I introduced that to my family.
- 29 AJ: Really? In high school.
- 30 TMW: In high school, and it was for gender-cross day. And my mama, I feel like she knew – it felt like
31 she knew.
- 32 AJ: So, is gender-cross day mandatory or was it optional?
- 33 TMW: No, it's not mandatory but it's just this fun thing. You know, the cheerleaders dressed up like
34 the football players, the football plays dressed up like the cheerleaders and they called it . . . at
35 my high school, we didn't have sport teams, we were just art kids. So, the boys went and put on
36 the ballet tights – you know, but I came in, I had my wedges on, this cute little sun skirt thing, a
37 little tank top – my titties pushed. I had on this cute little shawl and a cute little wig with a bang.
38 I was just like this – and then in the same week it was twin day; so, you had gender-cross dress

- 1 day and you had twin day. So, I was my twin – my own twin. I did make-up on this side and this
2 whole side was Michelle. I had a little hair piece with a hat on, but I had the hair piece coming
3 down this side and then there wasn't anything on this side. I was like, "Hey, this is Toni on this
4 side, this is Michelle." There's videos of me on Facebook. Our teacher Miss Williams, she was
5 our history teacher, she was like, "All right, RuPaul's drag race." And all the boys who were
6 crossdressing that day and then me, they saved me for last. You can hear all of the video and it
7 was like, "All right, saving the best for last, OK - Miss Michelle." And my teacher, she introduced
8 me and everybody just got up and started clapping and playing Diva by Beyonce. I had my own
9 little strut throughout the classroom. I have those memories and they fill me up.
- 10 AJ: They were feeling you, they were loving you.
- 11 TMW: Yes, at school. It was really my school that allowed me to feel a sense of belonging in the world.
12 I did not feel that with my family. I didn't think that they understood me or knew how to
13 understand me, and because of that, they didn't really talk with me. And, also, they didn't talk
14 amongst themselves or have that . . .
- 15 AJ: They just sort of ignored it and hoped it would go away.
- 16 TMW: And just keep going – not just me, just all the issues.
- 17 AJ: Really?
- 18 TMW: All the issues – you know Black families, we're deep in the south. The trauma really for a lot of
19 us lives here. You know what I'm saying? It really does. Trauma really lives there which stops a
20 lot of us from saying things or being able to communicate with people we love, or even know
21 how to communicate love to the people that we love.
- 22 AJ: What trauma are you speaking of? I mean, I think I have a strong sense of what you're speaking
23 of, but maybe for somebody watching this video . . .
- 24 TMW: I mean, different things . . .
- 25 AJ: Is it the trauma of Jim Crowe, is it the trauma of poverty, is it the trauma . . .
- 26 TMW: I think it's a combination . . . I don't think I'm thinking of, right now, like one side of . . . when I
27 saw trauma, I mean just pain that has been in your life, pain that has been taught to you –
28 taught to you.
- 29 AJ: Taught, yes – handed down, like DNA.
- 30 TMW: You know, handed down like DNA that teaches you to shut up, to not share, to fear sharing, to
31 fear releasing, to fear asking or making requests of the things that you need. I struggle with all
32 of those things and I struggle, even today, in my leadership development there are things that I
33 don't ask for and you're like . . . I'm not asking for the things but it's like for the sake of what? I
34 need to ask for X, for Y, for my people. You know, to break the cycle of pain in my family and as
35 a Black woman. It's all of those things that I think . . . yeah, that gets caught up. When I just
36 think about trauma that affects your voice – like trauma that really shuts you up, shuts you
37 down, causes you to close up and go away. Yeah, I think that Black folks have a lot of that.

- 1 AJ: Yeah. How do you get along with your family today now that you're out?
- 2 TMW: Now that I'm in my full glory, let's change the language.
- 3 AJ: In your full glory, thank you.
- 4 TMW: Yes, now that I'm in my full glory and I'm continuing to get deeper and stronger in align with it
5 too. So, I think the most transformative relationship is with my mom.
- 6 AJ: OK.
- 7 TMW: And, my mommy and I have not argued in a long time. It used to be where I wouldn't come
8 home for Christmas, summer breaks from college. It used to be I'd go months without calling
9 my mom and not really care; when she called me, I'd be like, "Ugh," and I'd be terrified to
10 answer the phone. When I did come home, I knew that I had to stay with . . . I had to have a
11 place to stay with my other friends. So, if I'd come home, I needed to call my friends from high
12 school and make sure somebody is at home so that I knew I'd have somewhere to go because I
13 knew that me and my mom was going to get into it. One day, four hours, two hours – was the
14 top max and me and my mama would butt heads after that time period, to the point where it
15 gets abusive on her side. Again, it stops right here to where I don't know how to say the things,
16 I don't know how to respond and then she gets madder because I'm not responding, but there's
17 nothing in me . . . you know, unless I could give the energy to feed that kind of anger and
18 aggression. I think that our relationship has changed tremendously and I shared this with the
19 Sojourner Truth Circle last night, but just the . . . I think that my mama's need or transition in her
20 life and in her body has really transformed our understanding of each other and understanding
21 of our relationship. Like I said, my mom was 309 pounds at one point and she had weight loss
22 surgery, working out, eating differently, take away the skin surgery – all of those things so that
23 she can see herself in her full glory. It took that for her to be like, in my opinion, in my
24 observation of her transformation and my assessment, it really just took her need . . . for her
25 transition to understand what you need.
- 26 AJ: Right.
- 27 TMW: Understand why . . . I understand that you doing the wrong thing, I understand that you want to
28 see yourself and you want to be free and there are ways for you to get there, so do whatever
29 you need to do to get there. And so . . .
- 30 AJ: So, her transformation sort of opened her eyes to your reality.
- 31 TMW: Yes.
- 32 AJ: Isn't therapy a part of weight-loss surgery?
- 33 TMW: You know, I don't know how much she did back in the day for it, because it's been about seven
34 years now since her surgery. I was in college and so I'm not sure if she was going to therapy and
35 doing things like that. She goes to therapy now, I know for sure. She just got done telling me a
36 few weeks ago that her therapist was like, "I'm proud of you." She's like, "Yay, I'm changing
37 things." I said, "Yes, I can see that because I can be with you for a whole weekend now." So,
38 there are things that are shifting and I'm really, really excited about the relationship. I moved

- 1 back home on faith. When I moved back home in 2015 from Norfolk, Virginia, where I
2 transitioned . . . where I started my transition and where I was going to college at Norfolk State
3 University and working for a trans community . . . an AIDS service organization, ACCESS AIDS
4 Health Care.
- 5 AJ: ACCESS AIDS?
- 6 TMW: ACCESS AIDS A-c-c-e-s-s AIDS Health Care in Norfolk, Virginia. I was doing some work with HIV
7 prevention in trans women, Black trans women, and running a support group called T Girls
8 Empowerment. It was my first facilitation kind of job and first group.
- 9 AJ: Wow.
- 10 TMW: It was the first time that I met the girls and they just really changed my whole life. And, getting
11 back to what we were talking about . . . we were talking about my mom . . . yeah, so I would
12 come down . . . oh, yes. So, I came home . . . Norfolk was kicking my ass – oh, my God, it was
13 the worst place ever!
- 14 AJ: Really?
- 15 TMW: Oh, my God, I was so drained. I felt like I was stuck and trapped and my creative . . . like my
16 power was just being condensed.
- 17 AJ: Why do you think that was?
- 18 TMW: It just wasn't the place for me. It wasn't a place for my spirit to thrive and be and flow freely. It
19 just wasn't a place for me. So, I knew I had to leave and right before then I went and studied
20 abroad in the Czech Republic.
- 21 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 22 TMW: I spent seven months in the Czech Republic – shout out to Rudy and Lolee and all my friends. I
23 would love you to keep all my little shout out moments . . .
- 24 AJ: Yes, we will keep those.
- 25 TMW: Yay!
- 26 AJ: Rudy and who else?
- 27 TMW: Rudy and Lolee, Delores.
- 28 AJ: Lolee, OK.
- 29 TMW: Lolee and my best friends who were studying abroad with me who both live in New York.
- 30 AJ: Were they Czech?
- 31 TMW: No, they're both Dominican.
- 32 AJ: Oh, they were Dominican but they went to the Czech Republic.

- 1 TMW: Yes, during the same semester as I did. Rudy is graduated from NYU and LoLee . . . I don't know
2 what school you went to girl, I was just enjoying you some serious. But yeah, Lolee and I went
3 to the same university in Czech Republic, and Rudy I just met at a bar.
- 4 AJ: Oh, wow, but they happened to be there studying.
- 5 TMW: Yes, they happened to be there studying and Lolee was in one of my classes. We took a walk
6 one day after class, we were the only folks of color in the program and so we were just like, "Oh,
7 all right, there you go – I'll get with you after class."
- 8 AJ: Were you serving tuna at this time in your life?
- 9 TMW: I was serving very much low hair color – reddish, auburnish-looking colors, sickening eyebrow,
10 pearls, very androgynous, gender queer.
- 11 AJ: Androgynous, gender queer.
- 12 TMW: Tight feel, but . . .
- 13 AJ: They were loving you over there, huh?
- 14 TMW: Yes, it was a Nigerian refugee, shout out to Johnny who was my boyfriend over there. Woوو,
15 Johnny. He was cute.
- 16 AJ: So, you had a boyfriend?
- 17 TMW: No, we wasn't my boyfriend for real. But, he just lived with me, he was like my little crush. He
18 always got me weed and . . . did all that stuff, always made me a drink when I went to the
19 Jamaican restaurant. He was that . . . he my little friend over there. He gave me great
20 memories. But, yeah, Czech was great. I needed to get away from my school, Norfolk State,
21 because it was just crazy. It was just . . .
- 22 AJ: An historically Black college.
- 23 TMW: Yes, an historically Black college, I was a part of the concert choir, which was deeply rooted in
24 Christianity and religion. The choir was going to pray my gay away, pray my transness away –
25 and the crazy thing was, half of them was gay. A shout out to all y'all.
- 26 AJ: OK.
- 27 TMW: And I love y'all. But, no, they just made me feel horrible about being me and then I was a leader
28 at the same time. I was the president of LEGASI, which is LEGASI, L-e-g-a-s-i, Leading the
29 Education of Gay and Straight Individuals, which was our university's Gay Straight Alliance.
- 30 AJ: Oh, wow. Right.
- 31 TMW: I was the president of that and we were invited to the White House, that was when Obama first
32 came in and was doing his Emerging Leaders Initiative with the National Black Justice Coalition.
- 33 AJ: So, you met the Prez?

1 TMW: We were doing so many things on a national level, as like a student organization, and getting so
 2 much recognition. Then in 2011, Marriage Equality came in New York . . . or maybe that was
 3 2010 . . . no 2011. And, our newspaper editor, Keana, she was queer, and she wrote the story
 4 and we, our organization, had a forum called, “No Homo” and talked about the different
 5 experiences of homophobia and transphobia on Black campuses. And so, our university was
 6 outraged. It made the front cover of a newspaper, it was online, it was a big thing. I had gotten
 7 approached by professors, English professors and different people, who were like . . . at the time
 8 they would be like, “Throwing shade, Mr. Williams.” “Mr. Williams, this is unacceptable. They
 9 will pull back funding for this university for things like this, this should not be in the paper. It’s
 10 OK that y’all are fighting for those rights and things, but this should just not be spread over all of
 11 the campus.” And so, I was really . . . really, I was the one . . . I was the gay person on campus,
 12 the gay rights activist on campus, and so everything that was gay or LGBT-related, came to me.
 13 You know, how that is? You’re just a token . . . and so, I was just so overwhelmed by that and I
 14 had just a strong desire . . . my mind from the age of 13 . . . oh, also, perfect story. I want this on
 15 – a shout out to Betty Ruth, my grandma, who is my only grandparent still living on this earth
 16 with me.

17 AJ: Betty Ruth, all right.

18 TMW: Betty Ruth, whose birthday is the 70th birthday coming up in July.

19 AJ: Oh, yes, you mentioned that.

20 TMW: And she . . .

21 AJ: Because Toni-Michelle is the 170th interview for the Oral History Project.

22 TMW: Yes, I am, so I was just popping off the 70 – I was like, “Ahhh.”

23 AJ: Right, she’s about to throw a 70th birthday party for Betty Ruth.

24 TMW: Disco party. And so, I was watching *Crooklyn* with my grandma and it’s that scene where RuPaul .
 25 . . do you remember that scene with RuPaul in *Crooklyn*? You know *Crooklyn*?

26 AJ: I’ve seen it many times, yeah.

27 TMW: Spike Lee’s movie and RuPaul, he’s in the corner store with the Hispanic guy.

28 AJ: Because they go to . . .

29 TMW: North Carolina, yes – exactly. And, in the beginning of it, Troy, the young girl who the story is
 30 centered around, she went to the corner store and they were going to steal . . . that’s the scene
 31 where they stole the potato chips and she stuffs herself with the potato chips and then the guy
 32 scared them and was like, “Don’t ever steal from my store again, I’ll whoop you – da, da, da,
 33 da.” But, RuPaul was in that scene and he was just like . . .

34 AJ: Don’t go too far.

35 TMW: Oh, don’t go too far . . . oh, yes, I forgot . . .

36 AJ: I know you’re a performing artist.

- 1 TMW: I know, right. I was ready to move. He was like, “Chimmy, chim, na, na, you don’t touch my pun
2 na, na – you punta, you punta.” But he was in full drag, so my grandma Betty was like, “Y’all
3 know that’s a man.”
- 4 AJ: Oh, really.
- 5 TMW: “Y’all know that’s a man, dontcha? That’s a drag queen.” So, I was like . . . in my mind,
6 everybody had their faces turned up and all that, my little cousins and stuff, and my face was
7 like, “Oh, it’s possible. Y’all said I was a man and I can look like RuPaul. Oh my God, I can be a
8 girl.” And it was a Black movie, it was like a total southern Black moment in my life. That was
9 just like, “Oh, wow.” And, I had a lot of shame at the same time because I saw how everybody’s
10 face was turning and how my grandma said it. “Y’all know that’s a man.” So, it was like . . .
11 those are some of the moments of low-key trauma, so I’m experiencing this . . .
- 12 AJ: Joy.
- 13 TMW: Joy of seeing myself, or thinking that I see myself for the first time, or seeing possibility for me
14 and at the same time experiencing the energy of not belonging and the energy of hate or disgust
15 that surrounded me. So, it was one of those moments too where I was like, “Oh, I won’t be able
16 to share this with nobody.” That contracted here and again, in this context of storytelling, of
17 shaming me to not share my story.
- 18 AJ: Right. I’ve got to go rent *Crooklyn* again. I haven’t seen that in a long time.
- 19 TMW: Yes, rent *Crooklyn*. But yeah, that’s one of the main moments and . . . yes, definitely.
- 20 AJ: What do you think is the relationship between the L, the G, the B and the T?
- 21 TMW: The relationship between LGBT folks is that all of us experience, at some point in our lives, the . .
22 . at some point in our lives, and early in our lives, cis heterosexual people. Like, very early on
23 the need to be free and having to figure out how to get free.
- 24 AJ: Wow.
- 25 TMW: That is what holds us and keeps us together, that’s the thing that I think we should all be able to
26 return back to when we feel like there’s nothing that we share in common. And, I think that
27 trans folks who have a binary identity, who have a . . . I’ll just say heterosexual trans faux coupe,
28 just have the desire to not be a trans person and not live their life with trans leading . . . as the
29 leading light of their spirit, I think that that is what . . . that’s what keeps different pockets of . . .
30 and it’s hard for me to talk about it because it’s a hard conversation, right. It’s a hard
31 conversation when all you hear is queer and trans, trans and queer, queer and trans, trans and
32 queer, LGBT and . . . hearing that someone doesn’t necessarily see themselves or have a desire
33 to be a part of it, but then there is . . . when I saw it, that movement or the narrative, more so.
- 34 AJ: And community.
- 35 TMW: And community, right. Even for me, I identify as a heterosexual trans woman and even though I
36 have had encounters with queer folks and things, little crushes and things, I really love Black
37 cishet men. I love Black men. And, I love Black men and there is just something . . . and I have a

- 1 historic longing, I don't know if the longing is still the same, but historically that's been branded
2 here and in my body, I long for the Black man.
- 3 AJ: Are you in a relationship right now?
- 4 TMW: I'm not. I'm just out of a relationship with a Black man.
- 5 AJ: How long were you guys together?
- 6 TMW: I spent a year and a half with him and it was great and it was hard. Yeah, I'm just finding that . . .
7 and he had his special powers as a Black man and he identified as a Black man of trans
8 experience as well. So, there were things that was very, very beautiful and powerful in just
9 everything about our relationship, and then there were things that were just really, really hard
10 and things that we just . . . that I, at 26, and finding my centerline and my freedom didn't really
11 have time to really give all of my all. There was a . . . it's like I'm always in a . . . my new thing is
12 learning boundaries for myself because I'm a person that gives a lot. I love hard and I lean all
13 the way in, and so I'm just learning that when I do that I don't have boundaries and then I lose
14 myself. And, I am committed to really finding those boundaries so that I can keep hold of
15 myself. I think that my relationship with him, because it was my first relationship ever – like real
16 relationship. I never dated, I had one real girlfriend in high school but that only lasted a few
17 weeks but she was my best friend, Jasmine Gray – shout out. She was very tomboyish and
18 things.
- 19 AJ: So, she was giving off some male energy.
- 20 TMW: She was giving off some masculine energy, she was. But, yeah, that only lasted for about three
21 weeks but she was my best friend, so we just did things . . . said things and then it was like,
22 "Yeah, we're really just best friends, girl." But, he was my first relationship ever and so, I was
23 just like . . . I don't know if I'm . . . I'm 26 and I'm still learning, or still in different battles with
24 myself and to be in a battle like this with somebody else for the sake of something else or
25 somebody else, I don't think I have the energy for it. And I was working like I'm working and my
26 work is my passion, it's what feeds me.
- 27 AJ: So, what's your work?
- 28 TMW: I'm a community organizer and internship coordinator with SNaP CO.
- 29 AJ: What is SNaP Co?
- 30 TMW: Aka, Solutions Not Punishment Collaborative in Atlanta. We are a Black trans-led organization
31 that wages campaigns to really fight against the criminal justice or criminal legal system and to
32 really . . . we're abolitionists and we really are in the business of transforming the city of Atlanta
33 to really be a place that all people will thrive, especially all folks of color – Black folks, brown
34 folks, formerly incarcerated women, sex workers, folks with mental health things, folks with
35 disability things. So, our people are literally all of our people and we fight and we wage
36 campaigns that impact all of those people – and, I think the best part about it was having NOW
37 in organization and our movement is work that the more that we are building the leadership of

1 Black trans folks, it's Black trans people who are actually are, "Yes, we always are fighting for
2 everybody else, that's what we do."

3 AJ: Right.

4 TMW: That's what you bring us in to do. And, we have to start fighting for everybody else, but we've
5 got to be strategic about it because we also have to be in the business of building our own. So,
6 that's where our membership is right now. So, I'm running an internship program that's
7 specifically for Black trans folk and this second cohort . . . our first cohort did amazing work and
8 they created a campaign and report called, "The Most Dangerous Thing out here is the Police,"
9 and then highlighted the experiences of the Atlanta Police Department and their interactions
10 with trans people in the city of Atlanta. And so, in the report we found that 1 in 12 of the trans
11 women that we surveyed had been sexually harassed by the Atlanta Police Department or
12 Atlanta police officers and that over 80% of the folks just didn't trust APD, that 36% of the folks
13 had called for help but then were arrested instead – like for domestic violence issues and things
14 like that. And so, it really spiraled into its own kind of campaign and I think that where we are
15 now, that one place where our learning curve from the first cohort and that project and that
16 campaign was that it was a project or a campaign that was really . . . we're all going into a
17 direction of our pre-arrest diversion initiative which is the campaign that . . . our first campaign
18 as an organization or a coalition and we won that in 2015. The pre-arrest diversion that would
19 get folks re-directed out of the . . . pretty much not getting arrested right there on the street,
20 but getting the services that they need – like housing. So, if it's a Black trans woman who may
21 be in midtown, engaging in sex work who may be homeless, then she would get housing and she
22 would get job placement, job training, and connected to other resources that she would need in
23 order to thrive instead of being thrown in prison for having to engage in sex work because she
24 doesn't have a job. So, just really kind of figuring out ways to slowly chip away at the system
25 and create our own systems to keep us out and to create spaces where we're taking care of our
26 own. I think that our new ideas or thoughts that we're strategizing and thinking about now of
27 building our own will be able to feed that vision, feed that goal.

28 AJ: Wow. Let me ask you this, Toni-Michelle, and to the extent that you feel comfortable, answer
29 or don't answer, but what, if any, medical interventions have you undergone on your journey to
30 Black womanhood?

31 TMW: Yes. So, I've been on hormone therapy for about three years now. I think it's important for you
32 to just share your story because somebody else maybe is going through . . . but, you know,
33 people can be critical of all this shit, but whatever. But, for me it's been like . . .

34 AJ: The reason why I ask, it's like it's not who you are - you have shared who you are, but this a
35 little more kind of . . . whatever.

36 TMW: Yeah, I got you. It's just me talking through the nerves to get . . .

37 AJ: I know Laverne snapped out on Katie Couric about surgeries and . . .

38 TMW: No, no, no. Actually, she didn't snap out, she said in such a centered and . . . I loved when she
39 did that.

- 1 AJ: Yeah, I know. It was an educational moment.
- 2 TMW: Yeah, I've been on hormone therapy for three years and honestly on and off for different
3 reasons, one reason being that I have Crohn's Disease so I've just been in the business in the
4 past . . . 2007, so like eight years or nine years of my life, taking shots, taking pills, being sick all
5 the time, going to the doctors – doctors just poking me all the time and not really even . . . and
6 then having Crohn's Disease, so many of the doctors making that the focus and then making my
7 desire and my longing to be in my body secondary.
- 8 AJ: Sure.
- 9 TMW: And, just those different experiences and the requests of, "OK, you can touch my stomach and
10 check my Crohn's Disease, but you're my doctor, can you please check on me in other places
11 because I need you all to touch her honey – I need to know that she's still all right, because she's
12 still in my body." Do you know what I'm saying? So, having those different experiences and not
13 getting good people who are willing to just be open . . . it really shied me away from the medical
14 industry and especially white people, random white people poking at me and touching my body,
15 like, "Owee, boobo and all this shit." I just don't be really having time for it. And, I know that on
16 this journey and hormone therapy is really important and so, I do what I have to do.
- 17 AJ: Have you had negative experiences with doctors? I know you talked about the focus on the
18 Crohn's Disease versus really taking you seriously about your gender identity.
- 19 TMW: I haven't had an experience where I was just totally disrespected, but energetically.
20 Energetically I can feel the presence of someone who doesn't want to touch me and does it just
21 for the sake of. I don't want any of those people in my energy field or touching my body.
- 22 AJ: Right.
- 23 TMW: That's just really important to me. And, yeah – that's just something that I value, hands being
24 laid on me. So, I really try to build with doctors . . . even for me to even trust you to think about
25 what you bother to pump into my body. I'll just be like so not trusting of white people.
- 26 AJ: Yeah, that's real.
- 27 TMW: White people and doctors and this industry and this industrial complex, that is. So, but – yes, so
28 I've been on hormones for three years and I do have aspirations and goals to proceed with
29 gender-affirming surgeries.
- 30 AJ: Good, good for you.
- 31 TMW: I think my not favorite thing has just been . . . or, my thing that I'm insecure about or thing that
32 keeps me up the most, just really feels like my skin and . . . my face and my skin and just getting .
33 . . yeah, I just think that that's what I've struggled with the most in my transition – that I'm really
34 ready to be on the other side of, which I know is slowly coming. There's a process and I've been
35 on that process and journey – so she is looking and being lovely in these recent days and so I'm
36 still going to continue on that journey.
- 37 AJ: Absolutely.

- 1 TMW: And, just be in the trust of the practices and the regimes that I have committed myself to.
- 2 AJ: Tell us just a little bit about this retreat that we're on here in Georgia, from your experience.
- 3 TMW: Yes, my experience . . . this retreat – the Sojourner Truth Leadership Circle Fellowship that is
4 really dedicated to our self-care as Black women. And, it has been great to have time . . . it's
5 great knowing that I'm a part of a program where there are folks who will continue a program or
6 have written curriculum that dedicates exactly that – dedicates self-care and the process and
7 the tools for self-care to us, and the resources, because we get the coins at the end.
- 8 AJ: Yes, there are resources.
- 9 TMW: So, there are resources towards my self-care and my healing and my vision and my goal, so that
10 has been just the reason why I make time and space to be here. I love any time that I'm with my
11 girls and with my family, I just love no matter where we are what we're doing. The thing
12 actually becomes secondary to the moments and times that we just have been together. So, I
13 think I'm still experiencing that but I think that this was different from our first retreat – we
14 actually are working towards those visions. So, I'm enjoying that a lot. Yeah, I'm still . . . I think
15 that this is also an interesting place and I think that I know that we've named it, or the
16 facilitators have named it, but they named it in a way that we haven't been able to discuss it.
- 17 AJ: Agreed, yes.
- 18 TMW: But, I think that it's so important that we continue to have those conversations of what
19 solidarity looks like between cis women and trans women, Black cis women and Black trans
20 women and what roles . . . yeah, so I think what has been difficult for me, because I think I'm
21 just in a longing and desire to be led by my people – like led by Black trans people, led by Black
22 trans folks and knowing that we don't have all of the resources and folks like SNaP CO and what
23 we're doing is creating those resources. But, I know that we don't have the resources and so
24 there's other folks who have been doing work, social justice work or healing work, who are cis
25 and heterosexual or cis and queer longer, but I think that it's so important that if we are
26 merging and if we are . . . that we talk about it and not just be like a thing that we know.
- 27 AJ: Right.
- 28 TMW: But, we talk about it and then we talk about how to build stronger alliances because I think that
29 even in this cohort, it's important that we build that into its intentions as a program because I
30 think if we don't build it in . . . like models of this kind of conversations, you know, that it won't
31 land fully for each person who will come in. And so, me saying all of that to say that I'm actually
32 in this experience at this thing has been beautiful. The ladies, the facilitators, have so much
33 knowledge and so much wisdom, so much anointing and power, and I love that I'm able to share
34 that space. And, I just don't know how I feel about them holding me and my healing and my
35 self-care as a trans woman and would prefer them to spend time or . . . and maybe this is a
36 growth assessment of how we can come out of this, being like the inaugural Black trans cohort,
37 but how we develop the leadership, our leadership, to be able to facilitate our own circles.
- 38 AJ: Got it.

- 1 TMW: Because it will look different, it looks different. It looks different when you facilitate with us or
2 when you take me out and have a private conversation than another facilitator who doesn't
3 share the same trans experience. But, it has resources and healing tools in all of those things.
- 4 AJ: Yeah, it's just different. It's different.
- 5 TMW: It's just the difference. So, I'm thinking and really hoping that . . . I'm honored to be in this
6 inaugural cohort, but really just my wish for the program is that we build in systems that will
7 sustain us, that the next time this happens for Black trans women that it could be Black trans
8 women leading this and not just be invited to or Skyped in – but facilitating it with y'all as cishet
9 folks or cis queer folks providing the resources and providing the space until we're able to build
10 our own system to provide the space.
- 11 AJ: Yes, wow.
- 12 TMW: So, I'm hoping that it grows into that and I'm really excited about it, excited that it could, and
13 hopefully it will grow into that.
- 14 AJ: I support that vision.
- 15 TMW: Yes.
- 16 AJ: I will advocate for that vision. Toni-Michelle, we really need to wrap up.
- 17 TMW: I know, girl. An hour and 15 minutes.
- 18 AJ: Yes, baby. Is there anything that I haven't had the foresight to ask you that you want to make
19 sure is included?
- 20 TMW: I know you've got a lot of questions on there. Can I see your questions, please?
- 21 AJ: You have answered quite a number of them, just about all of them, in your storytelling. Yes.
- 22 TMW: You know, yeah. Please tell me about romance, relationships, love and how that has been
23 impacted by your gender identity. You know, I'll talk about it real quick just because I just . . . I
24 talked about my longing desire for Black men. And, it is the only longing or desire that brings
25 me pain. And, as a self-identified heterosexual woman, I don't know what that means. I don't
26 know what that means yet, and if folks have answers or stories or experiences than I'm so open
27 to hear it. But, I just think that there is . . . we're talking about ways that cis Black women and
28 trans Black women can unite or be in solidarity. It's really where our energy can . . . there's just
29 some work that we have to do with Black men that say, "Oh, why do Black women have to do
30 the work?" It's because they're crazy and stupid without us. And so, all we have to do is teach
31 them like mama would teach . . . they just need mamas to say the things that they need to say
32 to make it click for them. Even if you hear stories about . . . yeah, I just think that that's
33 necessary work and I don't know what it looks like. These are just beginning thoughts as I try to
34 untangle how to blend with belonging and the pain that it brings. And, just my vision – my
35 dream of my Atlanta house on the east side, with two acres of land or more. And, my big house
36 is like a low-key ranch-style house because I hate steps – I hate steps in the house, and with my
37 husband and my doggie and my children. That's my vision, that's my dream. So, I'm really

- 1 trying to really settle in knowing that I belong in that vision and belong in that dream and that I
2 deserve that because it's what I've been working on for it to come to me, it's what I've been
3 praying for, it's what I've been manifesting in all of the things that I've been doing. And still
4 holding the contradiction that the reality is different and that it has brought and will probably
5 bring me more pain and uncomfortableness. I just wanted to bring that out because I'm hoping
6 that folks have things to share.
- 7 AJ: Yes. I don't have anything to share for a while if you're looking at me for that.
- 8 TMW: No, I'm not. I'm looking for when you put this up . . . people who watch this will be like, "Girl, let
9 me . . . send you some loving."
- 10 AJ: Right. That's a hard one, that's a tough one.
- 11 TMW: Ain't it a hard one. But it's just things that even us as trans folks and trans women who love
12 Black men, to think about as our choice as we continue to create the world and to transform the
13 world in a way that we can live in and thrive in and be in our full power and glory – shout out to
14 Cleopatra, the Queen of the Nile.
- 15 AJ: All right. And on that note . . .
- 16 TMW: Yes, thank you.
- 17 AJ: Thank you so much, my dear. This was a great interview.
- 18 TMW: Yay, I'm glad.
- 19 AJ: I love your energy, your spirit. Thank you.
- 20 TMW: Thank you.
- 21 AJ: Peace.
- 22 TMW: Peace.