

Aria Said
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins
Interviewer

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

June 6, 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 Aria Said -AS

3

4 AJ: So, hello. My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral
5 History Project at the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota Libraries. Today is June
6 6, 2017. I am in Madison, Georgia, about 80 miles outside of Atlanta, and I'm going to ask you
7 to talk about where we are and what the purpose is of us being here, but I'm here today with
8 Aria Said. How are you doing today, Aria? Tonight? It's been a long day.

9 AS: I'm good. I'm doing good.

10 AJ: Yeah, good. Can you state your name so we make sure we have the pronunciation correct?
11 Spell your name, so we make sure we spell it correctly, tell me your gender identity as you claim
12 it today, and your gender assigned at birth.

13 AS: Awesome. So, my name is Aria Said. It's A-r-i-a S-a-i-d. I identify as a transsexual female or a
14 trans woman, and my sex assigned at birth is male.

15 AJ: Yeah. What pronouns do you use?

16 AS: I use she and her pronouns.

17 AJ: Is that right?

18 AS: Yes.

19 AJ: Wow, I'm so happy that you're here tonight. Thank you for willing to be a part of this project.
20 Just to kind of get us thinking about reminiscing a little bit, can you tell me what is your earliest
21 memory in life, Aria?

22 AS: My earliest memory in life ever?

23 AJ: Yeah, it does not have to be related to your gender identity. If it is, it's cool; but don't think that
24 I'm asking what's your earliest thing about being gender nonconforming.

25 AS: My earliest memory in life . . . I think there's so many, but one that comes to mind in this
26 moment is my first time riding the swing.

27 AJ: Oh.

28 AS: Yeah.

29 AJ: Where was this at?

30 AS: This was in the St. John's neighborhood in Portland, Oregon.

31 AJ: Really? So, you grew up in Portland?

32 AS: I did, born and raised in Portland, Oregon – as well as Beaverton, Oregon, which is a suburb
33 outside of the city and in Tigard, which is also a suburb outside of the city.

- 1 AJ: Tiger?
- 2 AS: Tigard. T-i-g-a-r-d.
- 3 AJ: Oh, Tigard.
- 4 AS: Small suburbs.
- 5 AJ: Really? What was it like growing up in Oregon?
- 6 AS: Oregon is a really beautiful place that has all four seasons. Portland definitely has an energy and
7 a culture unlike any other city that I've been in and I think Portland is constantly evolving and
8 changing. And, yeah, Portland is tricky. I think people know Portland from what was counter-
9 culture and is now pop culture. Like, *Portlandia* and *Hipsters*.
- 10 AJ: One of my favorite TV shows ever.
- 11 AS: But, there is a large community beyond that of Black people, of immigrants, a really robust
12 Vietnamese and Cambodian population. And, yeah.
- 13 AJ: Really? Did you grow up in a two-family home? Not two families, two parents?
- 14 AS: Yes and no. I was adopted, so prior to that my birth mom, no. It was a single-parent home and
15 then with my adopted family, yes. Well . . . it was a two-parent home until I was . . .
- 16 AJ: It wasn't.
- 17 AS: Right, until it wasn't. So, yeah.
- 18 AJ: Siblings?
- 19 AS: Biologically, yes, I have one brother. And in my adopted family, I don't know if they would
20 technically be my siblings, but they were all older – significantly older, so I didn't actually . . .
- 21 AJ: You didn't interact with them very often.
- 22 AS: No, yeah.
- 23 AJ: Holidays and that kind of stuff.
- 24 AS: No, they had their own kids and stuff, so they were in their mid-20s and I was 10 when I moved
25 in with my family.
- 26 AJ: So, you were adopted when you were 10 years old.
- 27 AS: Well, I say adopted but I stayed with them until I was 16 and I was a ward of the court. But, I
28 just say adopted because it's easier.
- 29 AJ: Yeah. But, you kind of consider them family? I mean, you consider them family.
- 30 AS: Yes.
- 31 AJ: Do you still interact with them today?

- 1 AS: Yeah.
- 2 AJ: Well, yeah, you said your . . . you were telling me earlier about last week you had a trip to Las
3 Vegas, so was this your adopted mom or your biological mom?
- 4 AS: My adopted mom.
- 5 AJ: Yeah. And, if any question that I ask you is way too invasive or feels like insensitive, just check
6 me and be like, "Nope, I don't want to answer that." So, what was school like? When did you
7 first realize that you were not the gender you were assigned at birth?
- 8 AS: I knew, for sure, something was wrong, I think, when I was three or four years old. I took a bath
9 with my cousin and my cousin looked completely different than I did.
- 10 AJ: So, a child assigned female at birth.
- 11 AS: Yes. I remember being like, "Mommy, something is wrong." I mean, I didn't say it in that
12 particular way. I remember expressing to her that something was wrong and I remember being
13 penalized for it. And that's why, I think when we get asked the question of what's our earliest
14 memory of gender, I think I remember my earliest memory of gender is because there were
15 consequences attached to my behavior. And so, I think that's why it sticks out to me. But yeah,
16 I knew when I was three. It's that weird thing where I think as kids we know who we are before
17 the world teaches us who we are or supposed to be. And so, at three I was the expert of my
18 own life and knew that something just did not match.
- 19 AJ: Right.
- 20 AS: I had the age-old narrative of born in the wrong body, that's literally how I felt growing up. As
21 far as school, I went to a Jesuit school. I started in public school and then from 4th grade until
22 early high school, I went to Catholic schools, so that's where I got the bulk of my education.
- 23 AJ: When you were in school, did you express your true gender identity at all?
- 24 AS: I think others saw it in me before I wanted to see it in myself.
- 25 AJ: Sure.
- 26 AS: So, of course, as I got older, beyond being 3 years old, I was socialized that that was wrong and I
27 lived with a foster family in 4th grade in Gig Harbor, Washington, where . . .
- 28 AJ: What's it called?
- 29 AS: Gig Harbor, Washington.
- 30 AJ: Gig Harbor?
- 31 AS: Yes. A small military town outside of Seattle.
- 32 AJ: OK, wow.
- 33 AS: I went to Harbor Heights Elementary. I'm not used to ever talking about this, and in 4th grade, I
34 went to school as a girl for the time that I lived with that family.

- 1 AJ: Really, in 4th grade?
- 2 AS: Yeah. I had a white foster mom who was really progressive and there was this French film . . .
3 oh, my God, I can't think of the name of it.
- 4 AJ: Amélie?
- 5 AS: Huh?
- 6 AJ: Was it called Amélie?
- 7 AS: Maybe, where the boy is running through the fields in a dress.
- 8 AJ: Yeah, with a little skirt or tutu – yeah.
- 9 AS: Yes, that was the film. So, she had seen that film and she knew exactly who I was.
- 10 AJ: I've seen that film. I think it's called Amélie.
- 11 AS: And that's the scene that I remember watching. She made me watch it and it as after I had been
12 caught playing in lipstick, playing in clothes, playing in my foster sister's clothes and wanting . . .
13 like, little things. I always sat down when I peed and I was told that boys don't do that; I always
14 walked on my tip-toes, I never noticed until adults would point it out, like, "Oh, that's odd." So,
15 there was definitely a build-up of events. I knew . . .
- 16 AJ: So, how did the kids respond to you at school?
- 17 AS: Well, luckily when you're that young . . . so, I didn't start going to that school as a boy, I started
18 going to that school as a girl.
- 19 AJ: Right, you just only went as a girl, so no one really knew.
- 20 AS: Yeah, because it was a new foster family and I think I moved in at the beginning of the summer.
21 So, by the time I got to the school, it was, for the most part, it was well received. I don't think I
22 was outed, if that makes sense, and I don't think anyone in 4th grade . . . I mean, I was the only
23 Black kid in my entire grade so I don't think anyone wanted to mess with me period. I think
24 people more focused on the fact that I was Black than actually my gender. In terms of
25 difference, I think kids were more noticing my skin tone and my hair texture was completely
26 different than theirs. That's what I remember, I don't remember anything really negative. Well
27 . . . I remember this boy named Phillip who would hang out with me and then there was an
28 incident in PE where they told . . . someone told him, "Oh, my God, that's a boy." And then he
29 never spoke to me again. I do remember that.
- 30 AJ: But, you didn't really get picked on or bullied or anything like that in your 4th grade?
- 31 AS: No. So, my little brother . . . it was so funny, in 4th grade I was underweight because I guess I
32 had an eating disorder at that time. My brother was bigger than me, my little brother, and he
33 was in 2nd grade and he was around my height at the time, and bigger, and he was always being
34 suspended – like he threw a chair at his teacher and all kinds of stuff. So, yeah, I think people
35 were more afraid of him than they were me, so I didn't get picked on.

- 1 AJ: So, they didn't pick on you – wow. That's a pretty fascinating story. You went to school for . . .
2 so, you did what they call the "real life test."
- 3 AS: Ahhh, oh God, Harry Benjamin.
- 4 AJ: At 10 years old, right? 4th grade, that's like 10 years old.
- 5 AS: Nine, I was nine. Well, funny, it ended with that foster family, I think, because of my gender.
6 Now, as an adult I've learned that at that time neighbors did complain on my foster family and
7 they were concerned, because what they saw was me, a boy, wearing girls clothes, and then my
8 brother was super medicated on behavioral-related medications and violent and all that kind of
9 stuff. So, they actually – the state, moved us back to Portland. So, yeah, the next foster family,
10 which then became my adopted family around 10, they . . . my adopted dad is a bishop and so
11 he and my family were like, "No, you cannot do that – not in this house." And so, yeah, I had my
12 real-life test for a moment and then I had to go back into the closet.
- 13 AJ: Oh, yikes. What was life like in high school?
- 14 AS: High school was a blur. High school, I went to four different high schools.
- 15 AJ: But all Catholic.
- 16 AS: No – no, no, no. So, my freshman and sophomore year I went to two Catholic schools and then
17 junior year I went to a high school in the suburbs and then I graduated early but my senior year,
18 which was actually . . . anyways, that was a public school in Portland.
- 19 AJ: OK, wow. So, when did you come out?
- 20 AS: Well, high school was a blur because in middle school everyone . . . all the guys in my sort of age
21 range were starting to develop into puberty and I was dreading puberty. I knew it was coming
22 and I didn't want it to come.
- 23 AJ: Right.
- 24 AS: Everyone's voices . . . around 7th grade, 7th and 8th grade . . . I think 8th grade, when guys were
25 coming back to school and had facial hair and deep voices and were taller. I remember my
26 foster family used to be like, "Oh, you're going to be tall and you're going to be a handsome
27 man." I was like, "No." I did not want what was coming for me. So, as I began puberty . . . I
28 didn't actually start puberty until the middle of my freshman year, towards the end . . .
29 beginning of sophomore year of high school. I was so uncomfortable with my body so I gained a
30 ton of weight and then I lost a ton of weight. I was growing facial hair and I wanted to shave it
31 and my parents would not let me.
- 32 AJ: Really?
- 33 AS: Yeah, my mom had this thing where she . . . I wanted to get my eyebrows done because my
34 eyebrows naturally grow really thick – like Martin Scorsese type of eyebrows, and my mom was
35 like, "No, you can't touch your eyebrows." I had peach fuzz here and she's like, "Once you start
36 shaving you're always going to have to shave so, no you can't shave it."

- 1 AJ: Wow.
- 2 AS: And so, with that, I came out as gay my freshman year socially. Everyone already knew because
3 throughout middle school I had been teased and jumped and harassed, made fun of, spit balls
4 thrown at me, pushed down the stairs – all sorts of stuff happened.
- 5 AJ: Oh, my goodness.
- 6 AS: Yeah, I used to get jumped after school for being gay, and at that time I was like, “I’m not gay –
7 I’m not gay, what do you mean?” And so, that was happening and in freshman year, I was like,
8 “Actually, everyone is right, I am gay.” But, at home, I was not because my family is super
9 religious. I think everyone knew, I just never addressed it. And then, my junior year is when I
10 started wearing girls clothes and boys clothes and then I abbreviated my dead name and just
11 was pretty fluid. I was also working around that time, because I was 16, and so I was working in
12 retail and meeting all sorts of people outside of high school and I learned the word transgender.
13 Isis King was on *America’s Next Top Model* and that was when I knew. I was like, “That is what I
14 am.” Because I struggled with coming out as gay because I didn’t . . . when I would go to this . . .
15 I don’t know if it still exists, but this program called SMRC – Sexual Minorities Resource Center in
16 Portland. I wonder if that place is still around. But, when I went there it was the coolest place
17 on earth, especially for a super-sheltered person like me. And, all the literature and sort of the
18 cultural attributes of being gay, I didn’t identify with. So, it was that weird thing where I was
19 telling people I was gay but I didn’t believe it because it didn’t feel right. And then when Isis
20 King came out . . .
- 21 AJ: But, you did like boys.
- 22 AS: Oh, no, I was boy crazy. If I had crushes on boys, I would bake cupcakes for them. I was a mess,
23 yeah.
- 24 AJ: Oh, really?
- 25 AS: They didn’t necessarily . . . I used to write love notes, I was a mess.
- 26 AJ: They didn’t appreciate it, I take it.
- 27 AS: No, because . . . I never liked any of the gay guys. They were always my friends but I . . . yeah,
28 no. I had a crush on . . . I don’t know if I’m allowed to legally say his name, but his name was
29 Jordan.
- 30 AJ: If you don’t say his last name, I don’t think we’ll ever figure it out.
- 31 AS: OK. This guy named Jordan who played football – biracial, he had to be like 6’1”, which is really
32 tall in high school.
- 33 AJ: Right, in high school.
- 34 AS: He was a senior and I was a sophomore, so . . . you know. In my head . . . oh, I adored him. He
35 was a model . . . anyways . . . so, yeah.
- 36 AJ: And, you would write love notes.

- 1 AS: I did and I put them in his locker. I was embarrassed because all his friends then found out
2 because he was disgusted and so people teased me for weeks because of it, so I transferred
3 schools.
- 4 AJ: Really?
- 5 AS: Yeah.
- 6 AJ: Wow. So, your gender identity had some pretty . . . kind of significant impacts on your early life.
- 7 AS: Yeah. So, when I transitioned, people talk about coming out – I didn't come out when I
8 transitioned. I knew who I was and I got caught by my family. I didn't go and sit down and . . .
9 my family knew things were going on because it was an age where I would start to argue with
10 my family about my behavior. They would find, like, lip gloss on the kitchen counter or
11 something like that or I wasn't wearing any of the boys clothes that I was getting for the holiday.
12 So, all these little things always had some sort of consequence or outcome and . . . yeah, so I got
13 caught going to school in a rhinestone mini-skirt and a tank top.
- 14 AJ: Wow, that's a pretty pricey little chick.
- 15 AS: I know. At that time, I had refused to grow out my . . . or, I'm sorry, I refused to cut my hair. So,
16 my mom always wanted me in a low-cut zeezer and I was growing out my hair in rebellion.
- 17 AJ: Let me ask you, were your parents Black or white?
- 18 AS: Black.
- 19 AJ: They were Black, OK.
- 20 AS: My birth family or my . . . ?
- 21 AJ: No, your adopted family?
- 22 AS: Black.
- 23 AJ: They were Black, all right.
- 24 AS: Adopted mom is from Berkeley actually.
- 25 AJ: So, pretty progressive.
- 26 AS: She's not, but . . . that's always a weird thing. And then my adopted dad is from Mississippi. So,
27 yeah.
- 28 AJ: Wow. So, you got caught – like the school called your parents?
- 29 AS: No, my mom was driving down SE 82nd in Portland and saw me.
- 30 AJ: Really? Did she pull over?
- 31 AS: No, she mentioned it when I got home. She went home early and had called my foster grandma
32 and it was a whole thing . . . yeah, so that's how it was discovered and my mom was like, "If you

- 1 think you're that girl, then you have to find your own place to live – that's not happening in my
2 household." And so, that's when I moved out and I've been on my own since I was 16.
- 3 AJ: Is that right?
- 4 AS: Yes.
- 5 AJ: Wow. But, you stayed in Oregon, right? Because you went to college in Oregon.
- 6 AS: Yeah, so I stayed in Oregon. I finished high school . . . so, around that time, after I'd moved out,
7 my mom got a job in Seattle, so she moved and then I had a job and paid rent and lived with
8 roommates and finished high school.
- 9 AJ: Is that right?
- 10 AS: Graduated early. When I say that, it's like . . . I had enough credits to graduate early so I walked
11 a year early, but the school that I went to said that you had to do senior inquiry as your senior
12 year . . . like freshman inquiry, sophomore inquiry – it was like a homeroom class. So, basically I
13 started my first year of college during my senior year because a program called Upward Bound
14 paid for my tuition at Portland State. So, I started my freshman year while also knocking out my
15 senior year of high school. So, yeah.
- 16 AJ: Wow, that's pretty cool.
- 17 AS: So, I stayed in Oregon and then I . . . I had applied to other colleges but I think I was just afraid . .
18 .
- 19 AJ: So, you were already doing big things – 16 years old, living on your own, graduated from high
20 school.
- 21 AS: I know, when I tell it, people always are like, "Oh, my God, how did you do it?" But, in the
22 moment, it doesn't feel that way. I'm from Portland, so I would still see people that I knew.
- 23 AJ: Right, yeah.
- 24 AS: My family was famous in the Black church.
- 25 AJ: Oh, really?
- 26 AS: Yeah, I was always running into people that knew my family, so it never felt like I was truly on
27 my own because if they saw something . . . like I remember one time I went to a bar with a fake
28 ID and someone from the church was nearby, so they called my mom and my mom was like,
29 "Get out of that bar."
- 30 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 31 AS: And even though I was on my own, I still had this relationship with my family in this way where .
32 . . so, yeah – anyways.
- 33 AJ: What's your relationship like with them now? Do you have a relationship at all?
- 34 AS: It's good.

- 1 AJ: Yeah?
- 2 AS: Yeah.
- 3 AJ: She accepts you as Aria?
- 4 AS: Yeah . . . no. I mean, I go home for Thanksgiving and . . . yeah.
- 5 AJ: Strange?
- 6 AS: Yeah, it's strange. It's been . . . what? Eleven years now since I transitioned and my family still
7 calls me . . . they call me Aria or my birth name, which is Marcel, which I made my middle name.
8 Yeah, they . . . I don't know. They don't really see me . . . they know what trans is, they know
9 the difference between gay and trans, but for religious convictions don't really see the humanity
10 of my experience. So, yeah.
- 11 AJ: Oh, wow. That's got to be painful.
- 12 AS: Yeah. I mean, I've learned to really compartmentalize my life in a way to where I have my own
13 life. And then, when I visit my family it's . . . yeah, it's a once a year Thanksgiving, four-day trip
14 and that's it.
- 15 AJ: What about your younger brother? Do you see him? Communicate with him at all?
- 16 AS: No, I don't talk to him.
- 17 AJ: Is it because of your identity? Or, just you guys got separated? Because he wasn't in this
18 household with the minister?
- 19 AS: No.
- 20 AJ: What about your birth mom? Do you ever communicate with her at all?
- 21 AS: I don't talk to her either.
- 22 AJ: Yeah. Wow, what . . . you said you came out as gay, what other labels have you sort of used for
23 yourself over time?
- 24 AS: I used gay and then . . . in the beginning of my transition I was using transgender, and then I . . .
25 around college I realized transsexual just seemed to be more fitting. So, yeah.
- 26 AJ: And that's what you use now – transsexual?
- 27 AS: I mean, because I work in the trans work, I guess I just say trans or transgender, and then if
28 people ask, which they usually don't, but if they do then I usually . . . I self-identify as a woman
29 of transgender experience, as I feel that that is the most fitting.
- 30 AJ: Wow.
- 31 AS: So, yeah.
- 32 AJ: To the extent that you feel comfortable, Aria . . . well first, before I ask that question, how did
33 you come to your name?

- 1 AS: Oh, my gosh. I actually never had any intention of changing my name before . . .
- 2 AJ: Actually, your birth name . . . I have an aunt named Marcel.
- 3 AS: Marcel, yeah. And I still go by it, some people still call me Marcel. I never had an issue with it – I
4 mean, I did and I didn't. I mean, I didn't really have an issue with it until I had moved to San
5 Francisco where I met other, real-life trans people. Because before that I had transitioned alone
6 so I didn't know any local trans people – no, I didn't know anyone.
- 7 AJ: Really? In Portland?
- 8 AS: No. I went to a support group one time where I saw older white trans women, but I think their
9 experience was just completely different than mine at 17.
- 10 AJ: So, you didn't really resonate with it or associate with it.
- 11 AS: A lot of them were married and then they were dressing part-time, while undergoing like
12 electrolysis and they sort of . . . not minimized me, I don't want to use that language, but they
13 didn't understand the concept of me just living my life in that way.
- 14 AJ: I would think that they would have idolized you.
- 15 AS: No, I think they were like, "You're too young to make that decision." And, I think partly it was
16 projection, because they were older. And then also too, back at that time, before famous trans
17 people and visibility that we have now, I feel like there was a culture amongst trans women
18 where there was this thing that was unspoken where when you transitioned, you didn't do it
19 right away. You did your Harry Benjamin Standards of Care compliance – mental health, see a
20 therapist, and you presented as a man, you lived as a man and while living as a man, you went
21 and got your orchiectomy or your electrolysis or your laser or you would stock up on clothing
22 and stuff. And then there was this thing where you secretly sort of transformed and then once
23 you were ready or once you had gender-confirmation surgery, then you would live.
- 24 AJ: Oh, wow – so, like the Caitlyn Jenner story.
- 25 AS: Yeah – yeah, yeah, yeah. Caitlyn sort of represents what reminds me of what early-2000s sort of
26 transgender culture, where you subtly sort of make modifications and then you're able to fully
27 live from that point. But, I just couldn't wait. I had contemplated suicide, I'd attempted suicide,
28 and so I just needed to live. So, that's what motivated me to do it the fastest way, which is to do
29 it. So, yeah, by the time I got to San Francisco, that was the first time that I was seeing other
30 trans women my age who were . . . some of them have jobs, some of them were doing sex work,
31 some of them were models, some of them were performers, some of them were homeless. So,
32 I was seeing girls everywhere and . . . yeah, I socially didn't mind my name until I wanted to
33 change my gender marker. I had been able, as an old-school sort of trans woman, I had been
34 able to go to the DMV wash faced, put female on the application, gagged when they sent me the
35 ID with female because my birth certificate did not match. That old school kind of way . . .
- 36 AJ: When you say wash faced, define that.

1 AS: Washed face is when you go with no make-up whatsoever. So, it's an idea of minimizing
2 anything that would make people question your gender – allegedly. Thankfully, in an Instagram
3 world we can be smokey eyes and false lashes in the daytime and no one thinks them the wiser.
4 But, at that particular time, I think if your realness was undeniable, the trick was to go wash
5 faced, I guess – to not wear any make-up and see. So, at that time, yeah – when I tried to
6 change my gender marker, it was going to cost just as much to change my gender marker for my
7 birth certificate and passport through the court as much as if you change your name. And so, a
8 friend of mine was like, "Oh, why don't you just do it all in one." And, so I was like, "Oh, OK."
9 And she's like, "Because girl, Marcel is such a . . ." Bobbie Jean Baker had died and Bobbie Jean
10 hated my name, she hated Marcel. She refused to call me Marcel and she was like my aunt. I
11 would go to Sunday dinner and spend time with her. I very much cared about her opinion and
12 so, my friend, Vanessa, was like, "You know Miss Baker wanted you to change your name,
13 right?" And, I didn't do it because of her. I realized, actually, in that moment that I actually did
14 want to change my name. So, how I came up with Aria is . . . well, I fell in love with the name.
15 First, my freshman year of college, there was a girl that lived next door to me, her name was
16 Shawty and we used to tease her because of all the hip-hop songs . . . "Shawty." And she's
17 Persian and her cousin's name was Aria and I had never heard the name before and I thought it
18 was beautiful.

19 AJ: Wow.

20 AS: And then I saw a TV show where the main character's name was Aria and I looked it up and it
21 meant Lioness.

22 AJ: Lioness, wow.

23 AS: I loved that. I am a Scorpio but I always felt I should be a Leo because I love big hair. I wanted
24 something . . . I wanted a name that I could grow into and something that spoke more for who I
25 was, and so that's why I picked Aria. So, I retained my first and last name of my birth name, to
26 keep my past alive but also re-shape my future – that's how I thought about it.

27 AJ: So, actually, Aria, you're a pretty famous trans person. You have been on the advocate speaking
28 circuit, if there is such a thing. You know, moving around . . . I want you to tell me about Bobbie
29 Jean Baker and who she was. I know you said she was your aunt. Talk a little bit about the
30 family structures that we tend to set up in trans communities, and even just queer community in
31 general. But, also, have you ever met Isis King. You saw her on TV.

32 AS: No, I've never met her. I've never met her. So, yeah, I never got to meet Isis King. I've met
33 Janet Mock, I've met Laverne Cox, I have yet to meet Isis King . . . I have yet to meet her.

34 AJ: You guys are both pretty young, it probably will happen soon.

35 AS: Yeah.

36 AJ: Who was Bobbie Jean Baker?

37 AS: So, Bobbie Jean Baker is . . .

38 AJ: I mean, I know who she was, but the people watching this may not know.

- 1 AS: I first met Miss Bobbie Jean Baker at City of Refuge Church in San Francisco. And, I was living in
2 their non-profit housing, which was called Ark House.
- 3 AJ: Art House?
- 4 AS: Ark – like A-r-k.
- 5 AJ: Oh, Ark.
- 6 AS: Like Noah’s Ark. So, I was living in Ark House . . . sorry, I’m just flashing back to those days. The
7 requirement of subsidized housing, at that time, was to attend service at City of Refuge Church,
8 which I wasn’t opposed to . . . I had just experienced . . . so, yeah, Miss Baker, I met her at City of
9 Refuge, and she was the most interesting person I think I’d ever met. And, she had dreadlocks,
10 plus-sized dark skinned woman, trans woman. She, I guess, instantly loved me because I was
11 really quiet and really shy at that age . . . I think I was 20, I had just turned 20.
- 12 AJ: Right.
- 13 AS: So, I was still pretty reserved, shy, timid almost. And, she just instantly gravitated to me. I
14 smoked weed and she smoked weed, so we were soulmates. She was a minister at City of
15 Refuge and she also worked in transgender human rights work. I think nationally what’s made
16 her so influential is her work in ministry. She was someone that I really admired because you
17 literally saw a trans woman who was formerly incarcerated, who had been through hell and
18 back, having sort of a public relationship with God. And it came at this time where I was
19 ashamed to participate in any sort of Abrahamic faith because of what I was taught about what I
20 was and why it was problematic. What is it? The salt water proverb that they use in the Bible –
21 or lukewarm water . . . that Jesus will spit you out kind of thing.
- 22 AJ: Right.
- 23 AS: Like, you can’t have both. And so, to see Miss Baker be . . . her relationship with God was just so
24 awe inspiring for me. I think that’s why she’s known nationally. Locally, in San Francisco, she
25 was a matriarch and I think in the trans community, specifically, when we’re ostracized from our
26 families, the family-unit community in itself is an innate human experience to connect with each
27 other. So, we find it in other ways. And so, Miss Baker was someone, if you got off the
28 Greyhound bus, she would come to your rescue with a plate of black-eyed peas and cornbread
29 and make you come stay with her – she was that type of woman. She would mother you and
30 show you the way of the world and what you needed to know to survive – the same as the
31 family unit. But, when you are trans, the likelihood of danger is instantly elevated, the
32 likelihood of homelessness, of drug abuse, of losing everything – all of those things are probably
33 tripled or quadrupled, your experience is just a human that conforms. And so, what becomes
34 important is the people that you meet at that stage who are either able to help you navigate
35 those systems while you’re in it, or teach you how to avoid those systems if you can. And so,
36 that’s what Miss Baker definitely was for me – she definitely taught me . . . I mean, I’m from
37 Oregon and I don’t know how I would . . . I mean, I’ve done sex work, I’ve slept on the BART
38 train when I moved to San Francisco with a dream. She was someone who taught me street
39 smarts because I didn’t have any. I could tell you about Jane Austen and I was well read, an
40 aspiring academic intellectual – I was all those things. But, take me to 6th Street and Mission in

- 1 San Francisco and I would not have survived. So, it's because of someone like Miss Baker and . .
2 . I'm sorry, I feel like I'm going to cry, but something that I loved about her is before she died, I
3 feel like she got to see me better than when she met me. So, when she met me I was so timid,
4 so shy, so disempowered in who I was, and then she watched me get into sex work and I didn't
5 want to leave. She was like, "Girl, you need to get down here and apply for these jobs." I was
6 like, "Girl, fuck \$18/hour, bitch. I'm making \$200/hour, girl." And, I realize now that she didn't
7 have any stigma about sex work so much as she knew that I was capable of contributing and
8 testing myself more.
- 9 AJ: More, right.
- 10 AS: And all the other things that come with life . . . I mean, sex work is illegal so for that to be your
11 primary income . . . like all those things too. But, I think . . . a proud moment that I think of when
12 I think of Miss Baker, is I had just gotten a job with the Department of Public Health when she
13 was still alive. She knew me when I was timid and reserved and went on to do sex work and I
14 was robbing tricks and living the life. You know, a cokehead and all that comes with the night
15 life and just being a free party girl. And then, I started working at NGOs and community-based
16 organizations and I'd finally gotten this government job and I remember we were at some
17 community venue and she was like, "That's my niece-y. She done come a long way – yes, she
18 has." And, it's that kind of moment that just makes me really miss her.
- 19 AJ: Yeah. She was really good friends with the iconic Miss Major as well, right?
- 20 AS: Yes, she definitely . . . so, she actually was a huge sort of . . . Miss Baker was sort of a huge
21 contributing person to the development of Miss Major's organization TGI Justice Project. And
22 Miss Major really . . . excuse me, Miss Major and Miss Baker really did make TFIJP sort of a
23 national effort as opposed to a local effort of working with incarcerated transgender people in
24 places like Memphis, Tennessee where Miss Baker is from and New York where Miss Major is
25 from.
- 26 AJ: And Miss Major was one of the . . .
- 27 AS: She is our supreme.
- 28 AJ: Yeah, she was there at Stonewall when Marsha threw the brick and Sylvia started marching and
29 all of that. Mother Major was right there in the thick of that and is still alive today and working
30 on behalf of the community.
- 31 AS: And what's amazing to me about Miss Major is she is known all over the world and yet when
32 you meet her and you interact with her, you feel like you are meeting an aunt that you hadn't
33 seen in a few years. That's what it always feels like.
- 34 AJ: I've met her and that's exactly what it feels like.
- 35 AS: And, of course, other girls from across the country, other Black trans women who do this work
36 as well, have always joked that I've been lucky because I used to live . . . or Miss Major used to
37 live a couple blocks away from me and so I was always at her parties and barbeques and family
38 gatherings and stuff. All the other girls are like, "You're so lucky, you have Miss Major right

- 1 there.” I was like, “No, because Miss Major gets us together every time we see her – she puts us
2 back in line and in check. Y’all are in New York and in Arkansas, you all can act a fool on the
3 internet and drag each other through the mud and get away with it. That’s why you all never
4 hear about the West Coast girls is because Miss Major is right there.”
- 5 AJ: She keeps you in order.
- 6 AS: But, now she’s in Little Rock doing amazing things and helping the southern girls out. It’s
7 incredible to see . . . and I’m so glad to see that Miss Major is really leading her life actively and
8 traveling and doing all the things that she’s doing.
- 9 AJ: Yes, it’s a beautiful thing. Aria, to the extent that you feel comfortable, what medical
10 interventions have you done on your path to becoming a woman of transgender experience?
- 11 AS: Yes. My philosophy has been simple, though I’m not opposed to other people’s sort of
12 convictions about their body, I mean a disclaimer. I knew that I had passing privilege in college,
13 so that has definitely contributed to how I have viewed my body and what I’ve pursued and
14 what I knew that I should pursue and what I didn’t necessarily . . .
- 15 AJ: And passing privilege is . . .? You don’t get gawked at walking down the street, most people
16 read you as the person you are – female, right?
- 17 AS: Yeah, and I think everyone has . . . I think of it as a scale . . . well, not a scale but a spectrum and
18 so some people . . . to contextualize it better, passing privilege is purely subjective and there’s
19 tons of layers and context as to how you pass. So, when I’m in San Francisco, people know that
20 I’m trans. San Francisco has probably the largest trans population, at least on that side of the
21 country.
- 22 AJ: But, what about when you’re in Barcelona like you were just a couple of weeks ago?
- 23 AS: Barcelona . . . I was surprised because when you live in San Francisco, you get so used to it that
24 you just assume that everyone knows, which is good . . . for me, it has always been good
25 because I’ve always sort of disclosed my status as a person and . . .
- 26 AJ: You’ve just been who you are.
- 27 AS: And when you go to places like Barcelona or London, I guess I get read as a cis woman, yeah,
28 most of the time. So, I think it all just depends. And, yeah, I think there’s also . . . anyway, that’s
29 another day. The medical interventions I pursued, I definitely pursued hormone replacement
30 therapy. I don’t think that I would be satisfied or feel attuned to my body towards a better
31 mental health or mental health status had I not pursued hormones, especially when I was
32 younger. So, that is what I mostly pursued. And then I, let’s see, got castrated . . .
- 33 AJ: So, an orchiectomy.
- 34 AS: Yes, orchiectomy, which is . . . what is it? Removal of the male ovaries.
- 35 AJ: There you go, I like that.

- 1 AS: And, I actually did that because that was my comfort level with surgery. I had an opportunity to
2 get full gender confirmation surgery but, at that time, I was nervous because of my
3 expectations. I needed to minimize my expectations with the surgery as I felt that many trans
4 women, in particular – or trans women that I know in particular, when we pursue full GCS or
5 SRS, I don't know . . .
- 6 AJ: Gender confirmation, sexual reassignment . . .
- 7 AS: When they pursue that surgery, a lot of people believe that their life will dramatically change
8 when you get it, and it's true in some ways. I know socially most trans women I know, in the
9 day, when you would get your surgery you would sort of disappear and kind of had to, because
10 if you came back around the girls it was sort of the this thing like, "Oh, girl, tell us – show it to
11 us, we want to see." And then, also, you couldn't do sex work anymore so then you would see
12 these girls just disappear – they would get their surgery and then they would disappear and you
13 always wondered what happened to them. Now, there is a lot more transparency and a variety
14 in terms of lifestyles for trans people to live – but yeah, I was hesitant, because I got the
15 procedure done at 22 or 23, I can't remember exactly, and at that time I was scared because I
16 wanted the surgery to change my entire life. I knew, intellectually, that it wouldn't and so my
17 fear was that I was going to be disappointed in pursuing it. I didn't want to be disappointed and
18 have had the surgery. So, I had the orchiectomy and it's that weird thing where I instantly felt
19 whole and I felt like I was complete and then anything beyond that was just an accessory to that
20 feeling.
- 21 AJ: Wow, thank you for sharing that. I appreciate it. No electrolysis or anything like that?
- 22 AS: Oh, yeah – so, I have had laser. I have not done electrolysis because it looks really painful, but
23 I've done laser. Thankfully, I didn't grow a lot of facial hair coming up and so I didn't have a lot
24 to do but I have had laser done all over my body.
- 25 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 26 AS: Thank you for sharing that, I appreciate it.
- 27 AJ: What about love? Are you in a relationship? What's your sexual orientation?
- 28 AS: So, I identify as heterosexual. I think I'm queer in theory, not in practice, is what I like to say. I
29 love the idea of being queer and I think queer means something different for everyone. I know
30 that . . .
- 31 AJ: What does it mean to you?
- 32 AS: For me, I think it means that you are not the norm and you're not even trying to conform to the
33 norm and it can mean whatever you want. I think every time I hear someone identify as queer,
34 they always mean something completely different than what I imagined and I think that's an
35 amazing . . . it's such an amazing way to learn and unlearn about language that we use and that
36 not everything has to be definitive. So, I've heard people that I thought were lesbian but dating
37 trans men self-identify as queer and I think it just leaves room for everything – and nothing at
38 the same time.

- 1 AJ: Right.
- 2 AS: In my head, I'd like to think that I am this open-minded person that would date anyone and I'm
3 quite sure that maybe at some point in life I will fall in love with a woman or a man or a trans
4 person. It has not happened and it's mostly been with cis straight men. So, yeah, I currently am
5 not in a relationship but I have been fortunate enough to have really great relationships in the
6 past.
- 7 AJ: Oh, great. When did you first meet a trans-identified person?
- 8 AS: The first time ever?
- 9 AJ: Yes.
- 10 AS: Let's see, probably Isis King, although I've never actually met her.
- 11 AJ: You saw her on television and she was an inspiration.
- 12 AS: Yeah. And the first time I met one was at SMRC, that had to be 2007. And, yeah. The first time
13 I met a Black trans person, I was 20.
- 14 AJ: And that was Bobbie Jean?
- 15 AS: No, that was this Puerto Rican girl named Jasmine. As soon as I got into the neighborhood, she
16 was like, "Hey, mama." She was 6'2" and gorgeous. I was so embarrassed at that time, I was
17 like, "Oh, my God, why is she yelling at me? She's so loud." She was strikingly gorgeous and she
18 wanted everyone to know, "I am a beautiful woman." I just loved her spirit, loved her
19 confidence.
- 20 AJ: Are you still friends?
- 21 AS: Yeah, I just had brunch with her on Sunday.
- 22 AJ: Oh, fun. I'm glad to hear that – so she's still alive and kicking.
- 23 AS: Oh, yeah – definitely.
- 24 AJ: You mentioned to me once that you had some experiences at Divas, which is this world-famous
25 drag bar. Is it a strip club? It's not really a strip club, is it?
- 26 AS: It's something of everything.
- 27 AJ: I mean, girls get to different levels of undressness – yeah, so I guess it is a strip club but mostly
28 transsexuals or transgender . . . or drag queens, I don't know.
- 29 AS: So, Divas is an interesting place. It's only . . . they call it a tranny bar, I don't know – a lady boy . .
30 . or whatever they're calling it these days. But, it's one of the only bars in the country that
31 promotes this exclusivity to trans women. And, over the years Divas has always been something
32 different. I danced at Divas years ago as a stripper and then I also escorted outside of Divas
33 because Divas does not endorse prostitution in any way. But, Divas, it's interesting. I've
34 definitely met people from all over the world at Divas. I've met cross dressers, transvestites, I've
35 met trans women from all over the country and the world. I've never really seen a lot of trans

- 1 men there. There's definitely been queer people there, but it's mostly run by drag queens, so
2 they sort of run the bar and it is primarily staffed by transsexual women, mostly Asian
3 transsexual women.
- 4 AJ: Yeah, that's a pretty iconic bar in the trans community.
- 5 AS: A lot used to happen at Divas. Divas definitely used to be the spot.
- 6 AJ: It could be kind of shady too.
- 7 AS: Oh, yeah. It's right in the middle of the Tenderloin, lower Nob Hill area. There's that and I think
8 culturally, we're just a community that's not going to take shit. So, yeah, shady stuff has
9 happened at Divas, fights break out in front of Divas sometimes. But, to be quite honest, I
10 remember the days of Divas when Divas was a community center, when on my lunch break I
11 would walk up Polk Street and go to Divas and eat my lunch there and kiki with the girls. And,
12 even though we all had very different lives, we still very much saw each other and would hang
13 out. It's not like that anymore because San Francisco, that area in particular, has been really
14 gentrified. But, in the old days . . .
- 15 AJ: Which means low income, differently gendered, drugs.
- 16 AS: People of color, yeah.
- 17 AJ: People of color, they're all gone.
- 18 AS: Can't afford it. Also, gentrification has this weird way of ousting those people even if they don't
19 live in that neighborhood. Many trans folks, as we know, battle homelessness and other issues
20 and so gentrification sort of closes in on communities who don't live in one particular
21 neighborhood. And so, in this case, that's what happened when that area was being gentrified.
22 And then, law enforcement sort of increased its monitoring and surveillance of sex work, it
23 became harder to survive in that area so lots of the trans women that I know from that era that I
24 was at Divas moved, either to Las Vegas or other cities. So, it's a different landscape now. And
25 then, crystal meth is definitely the drug of choice on Polk and Post and so many trans women
26 move here to San Francisco, sort of bright eyed and ready for the new world and then with the
27 crystal meth sort of culture, there is not as much accountability in that we don't get to see them
28 that often.
- 29 AJ: So, you still live and work in San Francisco right now.
- 30 AS: Yeah.
- 31 AJ: Can you talk to me a little bit about this event that we are at for the next couple of days and
32 what it means to you?
- 33 AS: So, this is the Sojourner Truth Leadership Circle of the Auburn Theological . . . excuse me, I got
34 that wrong. Sojourner Truth Leadership Circle Fellowship for Transformational Leadership,
35 which is part of the Auburn Theological Center . . . University . . . Institute?
- 36 AJ: Seminary.

- 1 AS: Seminary – there we go, that’s the word. And, what it is, at least this year, is a cohort of Black
2 trans women from across the country doing amazing efforts to advance human rights of
3 transgender people. And, it’s kind of . . . the first retreat was kind of interesting to see like all
4 these sort of brilliant women that . . . you get to work with them but you don’t get to process
5 the gravity of their sort of contribution. And so, yeah – that’s an amazing experience in itself,
6 but what we are doing is . . . for us to . . . we give so much of our lives in the work that we do
7 because it’s a deconstruction of self and self-preservation, but also the people that we know –
8 preservation of our community. And, in that process we don’t take care of ourselves. I mean,
9 we do . . .
- 10 AJ: And we don’t.
- 11 AS: And we don’t.
- 12 AJ: I mean, let’s keep it real.
- 13 AS: And so . . .
- 14 AJ: You just keep running until you run out of gas.
- 15 AS: Yeah, and no one tells you . . . you’re put in a position where everyone needs something from
16 you and so for a long time before I joined this Fellowship, I was questioning my own life because
17 I was like everyone seems to need me but who do I go to? Because, when my mom can’t pay
18 her mortgage, I have to pay for it and in my community, I constantly have to do crisis
19 intervention and, “OK, we’re going to find you a bed to sleep in tonight.” And, “OK, we’re going
20 to get you some food,” and, “Here’s a gift card to do this.” “Come do this research study and
21 you’ll get \$30 cash which will hopefully get you . . .” And doing all the things and then when I’m
22 hurting, I don’t have anyone to turn to, I don’t have anyone to help me or hold me. And so, this
23 has definitely been the first sort of experience where, like, Valerie was saying, no one tells trans
24 women, “Go and get well.”
- 25 AJ: And support them in that.
- 26 AS: Yeah, “And we’re going to support you in getting well.” No one ever says that. We just talk
27 about trans people as being disenfranchised and marginalized and 70% of us face homelessness
28 and unemployment, three times the murder rate of the country. We talk about those things
29 and we’re able to regurgitate those things and . . .
- 30 AJ: Twelve trans women of color have been murdered in 2017.
- 31 AS: Exactly. And, I think it’s so essential that a program or a project like this exists, just promoting
32 the wellbeing of trans women who are already fighting to free the people. So, yeah.
- 33 AJ: Wow. Last question, Aria . . . it’s a two-part question.
- 34 AS: OK.
- 35 AJ: So, what do you think the agenda should be for the trans community? And then, where do you
36 see the trans community 50 years from now?

- 1 AS: The agenda for the trans . . .
- 2 AJ: At which time, you'll be about Miss Major's age 50 years from now, so it's not that unrealistic.
- 3 AS: I know, that's so weird when you put a number to it – I'm like, "Oh, yeah, huh." I think . . . my
4 hope for the community is that I think visibility has helped us and it has hurt us. I think there's
5 always a blessing and a consequence at the same time, and consequences don't have to be bad
6 – they don't have to be good either. But, visibility has done a lot of work on our behalf in sort of
7 restoring our humanity, which I think is important. I think we've had to do extra work in laying
8 the foundation and saying, "Hey, I am human and this is actually a human experience. This isn't
9 some new phenomenon of the internet; transgender people have existed since the dawn of
10 time and this experience has largely been ignored since Christine Jorgensen and/or it's been
11 sensationalized."
- 12 AJ: And we know this to be true because the Bible, they wrote about trans people.
- 13 AS: Right, eunuchs and . . . there's always been different words that we've used to describe the
14 transgender experience and it's . . . yeah, it's been dismissed. I think when I transitioned, the
15 only model of trans people that I saw was on Jerry Springer. And so, when I was 16, my fear,
16 and this was before Isis King, was that I would not be normal – that I would be a freak. And, you
17 know, even though everyone believes in their individuality, no one wants to be abnormal.
- 18 AJ: Right.
- 19 AS: Everyone wants to be an individual, but no one wants to be not normal.
- 20 AJ: I think about that movie *The Holy Grail* or whatever, I be normal.
- 21 AS: Right, and so my . . . I'm really glad that we have possibility models and celebrities like Caitlyn
22 Jenner and Laverne Cox, that we have women who are articulating their own experience, which
23 actually happens to bring in so many other trans people like Janet Mock through their stories
24 and telling their stories and so on. And, I think my agenda is that we transition past visibility and
25 we move towards where the gay community sort of was in the late 1990s and 2000s, where
26 they were sort of acculturated into mainstream – not acculturated in that they mirrored the
27 mainstream culture but that they were seen as just as normal as. There was like a . . . there was
28 a thing going on in sort of the gay rights movement where people sort of understood the
29 humanity of gay people and matched that understanding of being like, "They're gay, OK." And, I
30 think we still have so much work to go towards that effort, but at least in that way I feel like
31 trans people would have a choice – that trans people could choose to be visible and/or choose
32 to be stealth and both would be seen as equally good, that trans people would then have the
33 decision of what visibility means to them. And then 50 years from now, I think . . . I mean, I
34 think that the way that the movement is going towards trans human rights and freedom, it's on
35 steroids right in this moment. It's moving so quickly and things are rapidly changing and during
36 Obama's administration, I don't think that we thought that we would be facing a thing like the
37 bathroom bill being a real reality in North Carolina, of banning trans people from using the
38 restroom. And so, it feels like we take 10 steps forward and then have to take five steps back.
- 39 AJ: Right.

- 1 AS: So, my hope is that in 50 years that the community . . . that there will be so many of us that it
2 will be hard to ignore us and/or discriminate against us.
- 3 AJ: Aria, thank you so much for being willing to sit with me and talk with . . . maybe millions of
4 people, potentially, who will see this, so openly and honestly and beautifully and articulately
5 and . . . it's just such a joy.
- 6 AS: Thank you.
- 7 AJ: So, is there anything that I didn't have the presence of mind to ask that you would like to make
8 sure is included?
- 9 AS: No.
- 10 AJ: Good?
- 11 AS: Yes.
- 12 AJ: Well, I deeply appreciate this opportunity, and until we meet again.
- 13 AS: Thank you for having me. That's a wrap.
- 14 AJ: That's a wrap.