

Melinda Lee
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins
Interviewer

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

August 17, 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 Melinda Lee -ML
3
4 AJ: So, hello.
5 ML: Hello.
6 AJ: My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History Project at the
7 University of Minnesota Tretter Collection in LGBT Studies. Today is August 17, 2017, and this
8 morning I am on the campus of the University of Minnesota in Applebee Hall and I am honored to be
9 sharing time with the Associate Director of the . . .
10 ML: Gender and Sexuality Center for Queer and Trans Life. Assistant Director.
11 AJ: Assistant Director, OK.
12 ML: Yes.
13 AJ: I said Associate Director, but Assistant Director. And, yeah, that title is a little bit long and it kind of
14 still eludes me. It's pretty new, right.
15 ML: Yes.
16 AJ: So, Melinda Lee. How you doing, Melinda?
17 ML: Good, given the circumstances of what's happening in the U.S. right now. I'm here, yeah.
18 AJ: Yeah, I want to talk a little bit more about that at some point in our conversation, but before we do
19 that, can you state your name, spell your name, tell me your gender identity as you define it today,
20 your gender assigned at birth, and the pronouns you use.
21 ML: Sure. My name is Melinda Lee. It's spelled M-e-l-i-n-d-a L-e-e. I am a gender non-conforming, non-
22 binary person. I go by they/them pronouns and I was assigned female at birth.
23 AJ: OK, very good. Thank you. So, I'm really happy to be here with you today, Melinda. If you don't
24 mind sharing with me your earliest memory in life. What's the first thing you remember?
25 ML: That's a good question.
26 AJ: And, it does not have to be around gender identity at all. If it is, that's OK, but that's not a
27 requirement.
28 ML: My earliest memory . . . you know, it's pretty shoddy, my memory, but I'll say that I have a blurry
29 memory of being in a mall with my father and my sisters. I think we were on an escalator. It's not
30 that exciting.
31 AJ: How old do you think you were?

- 1 ML: Probably like six or seven.
- 2 AJ: Wow, OK. Where did you grow up?
- 3 ML: I grew up in Long Beach, California.
- 4 AJ: Long Beach – the LBC.
- 5 ML: The LBC, yup. Born and raised.
- 6 AJ: Is that right? Wow, West Coast. What was it like?
- 7 ML: It was a . . . so, Long Beach, California has the largest population of Cambodian people outside of
8 Cambodia, so I grew up leaving the house and really only ever seeing Cambodian people or Mexican
9 folks, because there's a large demographic of those two populations, and hardly any white folks
10 growing up.
- 11 AJ: No African Americans in Long Beach?
- 12 ML: Yeah, but not really in the neighborhood that I grew up in. I think that the communities were pretty
13 segregated and also there was a lot of gang activity in Long Beach, so the . . .
- 14 AJ: So, people stayed in their own neighborhoods.
- 15 ML: People stayed in their own neighborhood. So, yeah, there was a lot of gang violence growing up.
- 16 AJ: Crips and Bloods.
- 17 ML: Yeah, and other factions too. So, yeah, it wasn't unusual to hear gunshots every day – yup, every
18 day.
- 19 AJ: Helicopters.
- 20 ML: I don't know about helicopters – again, my memory doesn't serve me the best, but gunshots were a
21 regular occurrence. We, growing up, I just stayed on my block. We would go to the nearby Dollar
22 Store or we'd go to the Asian Market, but really, we just stayed in our block. I had pretty explicit
23 direction to not go in other areas.
- 24 AJ: Wow, that's kind of traumatic, actually.
- 25 ML: Yeah.
- 26 AJ: But, I guess, as a young person, you're just used to it, you don't really think anything weird about it
27 until you go somewhere else.
- 28 ML: Exactly.
- 29 AJ: What was elementary school like?

- 1 ML: Elementary school . . . I have some pretty good memories. Because there's a huge population of
2 Cambodian people, there was a Cambodian teacher, we were taught the language in elementary
3 school, the Cambodian language, as part of our curriculum. Yeah, I think it was fine.
- 4 AJ: So, it was a welcoming place.
- 5 ML: Yeah, culturally specific, culturally responsive.
- 6 AJ: That's awesome. What was home like? How many siblings? Do you have any siblings?
- 7 ML: Yeah, so I have three older sisters and I also have a couple of younger half-brothers but I didn't grow
8 up with them. Myself and my sisters were raised by my grandma since we were born. We stayed in
9 different places growing up, but eventually we settled on a small house. We didn't own it or
10 anything, we shared it with my uncle who lived there. We had a little garden, but yeah it was
11 definitely still pretty . . . a lot of gang violence in the area.
- 12 AJ: Your parents . . . were your parents around?
- 13 ML: Yeah, so my dad wasn't around growing up pretty much the whole time. My mother was physically
14 in the city but she wasn't taking care of us.
- 15 AJ: In your household.
- 16 ML: Right, she was doing her own thing. Yeah, I don't really know the circumstances at the time, but I
17 think my father was struggling with addiction. I know now that he, at least in the last 10 years, has
18 been, but growing up, I'm not really sure what was going on.
- 19 AJ: Wow. How did you guys deal with not being connected to your parents in close ways.
- 20 ML: I think . . . if I were to make sense of it now, I think that we kind of were all struggling with it in our
21 own different ways. There was a lot of sibling rivalry happening. I was my grandmother's favorite so
22 I got a lot of the brunt of that.
- 23 AJ: I see a photo of your grandmother on your desk too.
- 24 ML: Right, yeah.
- 25 AJ: That's pretty cool.
- 26 ML: She's definitely my favorite person.
- 27 AJ: So, she was there and she was raising you guys.
- 28 ML: Yup.
- 29 AJ: So, that's sort of your parental figure then?
- 30 ML: Yes, for sure. And she died when I was 14.

- 1 AJ: Wow, that's pretty tough. Did you have any . . . let me rephrase that. When is the first time you
2 started to think about your gender identity?
- 3 ML: I would say when I actually moved to . . . I thought about gender in an unclear, without direction,
4 type of way when I was in my teens. But, I would say that when I was in my early 20s is when I
5 started thinking about my gender beyond the binary, in specific ways. So, yeah.
- 6 AJ: You mean you're not in your early 20s right now.
- 7 ML: I'm 27.
- 8 AJ: OK, so your late 20s. Oh, man. So, you started thinking about it when you were here, when you got
9 here. Had you thought about your sexual identity prior to . . .?
- 10 ML: Yeah, my sexual preferences? My sexual orientation?
- 11 AJ: Yeah.
- 12 ML: Yeah, I feel like I was definitely attracted to folks who weren't cis men in a curious way when I was
13 really small. I feel like I thought my teacher was really pretty growing up, in kindergarten and stuff.
- 14 AJ: You felt like what was really pretty?
- 15 ML: My teacher, who was a woman. I think I was in 5th grade or something and I remember thinking she
16 was really pretty, but not really knowing what that was about.
- 17 AJ: Right.
- 18 ML: And then I became . . . I've been gender non-conforming for a while and in terms of owning my
19 sexuality as not being straight, I think that came when I was in western Mass, because I lived in
20 Massachusetts for about five years. I went to a pretty progressive high school and I . . .
- 21 AJ: Was that in Massachusetts? You went to high school in Massachusetts?
- 22 ML: Yeah, I went to a few different high schools but yeah, the one in Massachusetts that I went to was
23 pretty progressive. I saw more queer people . . . so, I think I was probably 15 when I realized that I
24 wasn't straight.
- 25 AJ: OK.
- 26 ML: And then, 16 when I kissed someone who wasn't a man, a cis man.
- 27 AJ: I love how you frame that – that you were attracted to non-cis gender males.
- 28 ML: Yes.
- 29 AJ: And that's a whole range of people.

- 1 ML: Yeah, that's a whole range of people.
- 2 AJ: Biological women, trans women, trans men . . .
- 3 ML: Right, right.
- 4 AJ: Which, I guess, could be the definition of queer.
- 5 ML: Yes.
- 6 AJ: What labels have you used to define yourself and how has that changed over time?
- 7 ML: Well, I think I never really identified as anything other than . . . I can't say that I ever said I was
8 straight when I was growing up. I think I jumped straight to queer. I don't think I owned any of the
9 other identities . . .
- 10 AJ: Because you're . . . you grew up in southern Cal, you're 27, you went to this really progressive high
11 school in western Mass – that language existed. Queer and queer identity, that was . . . there were
12 queer studies, I think, by the time you were at colleges and universities. It was definitely a part of
13 our lexicon. So, you just went from sort of no identity straight to queer.
- 14 ML: Yeah. I think part of it was because I wasn't really sure what I was and then when I found the word
15 queer, it just really resonated with me.
- 16 AJ: Have you ever dated guys?
- 17 ML: I had a boyfriend growing up in high school.
- 18 AJ: Is that right?
- 19 ML: Yeah, we were really cute together, actually. I was a little punk kid when I went to high school in
20 western Mass and he was a punk guy. And then he realized that I wouldn't have sex with him and
21 then we mutually agreed that we should end our relationship.
- 22 AJ: Yeah.
- 23 ML: It was good while it lasted.
- 24 AJ: Oh, wow. What challenges have you experienced or faced since you have been out as a non-binary,
25 gender queer . . . would you say masculine of center, or you don't use that frame?
- 26 ML: No, I don't.
- 27 AJ: So, non-binary, gender queer person.
- 28 ML: Yeah.

- 1 AJ: Who, I mean, just seeing you walking through the world, even though I know you don't claim that as
2 an identity, but I would think people maybe put a masculine label on you.
- 3 ML: Yeah.
- 4 AJ: What challenges have you experienced since you've been sort of navigating the world in that space?
- 5 ML: Yeah, I think there are many challenges that come with the way that I present to the world. Where
6 do I start is the question? I think one of the scariest things, for me, was returning to people in my
7 family – not necessarily . . . I don't really feel beholden to my mom or my father, in any significant
8 way. But, I remember visiting some elders in my lineage and being afraid of not being accepted
9 because of the way I presented.
- 10 AJ: Sure.
- 11 ML: It turned out to be really, incredibly fine actually.
- 12 AJ: Is that right?
- 13 ML: Yeah, I remember sitting next to my great . . . I forget what she is in relation to me, but I feel like my
14 father's aunt or something like that. She was super welcoming and loving and sat really close to me,
15 gave me a Buddhist bracelet and blessed it for me and tied it on to my wrist. So, I think that's one of
16 the greatest challenges is reconciling how I can hold this gender identity and gender presentation
17 without . . . and be humble about it, I guess, when I'm with my elders, my Cambodian elders.
- 18 AJ: How about your sisters?
- 19 ML: They're incredible. I remember telling one of my sisters when I visited, that I was non-binary. And
20 she was like, "Thank you for telling me," and asked me questions about how she could be better and
21 really strives to respect my pronouns and talk about me in gender non-specific ways to her friends.
- 22 AJ: Wow, that's awesome.
- 23 ML: Yeah, and my other sister does the same thing and she'll correct people. I remember when my little
24 half-brother posted something that mis-gendered me, my other sister came through and was like,
25 "Hey, just so you know, Melinda goes by they/them." So, my sisters are really onboard. The other
26 day, my second oldest sister Lisa, posted something that was about trans folks and someone said
27 something really transphobic and she stood up for trans folks. So, it's been really incredible to have
28 that.
- 29 AJ: That's awesome. Are they still all in California? Do you spend a lot of time with them at all?
- 30 ML: I don't get to spend as much time with them. I honestly didn't speak to them for many years after I
31 moved away when I was 14. I just saw Lisa, my second oldest sister, for the first time in 10 years just a
32 few years ago. But, now I try to see them at least once a year. I feel like I have a really special
33 respect for them because we've been through a lot and they're all doing really incredible things.

- 1 AJ: Good. I'm glad to hear that. What have been some of the more positive aspects of your life since
2 you've began to express yourself in this way? And, I don't know, maybe I'm cutting you off from
3 some of the challenges. You talked about you were worried about your family, but that seems like
4 that was a pretty good outcome. Are there any other challenges, like in the workplace or academic
5 settings or . . .?
- 6 ML: Yeah, I think . . . I think the common theme that I experience as a gender non-conforming person is a
7 constant rendering of invisibility that happens not just from people in the way that they speak and
8 the language that they use, but the way that institutions are built up, the way that architecture is
9 built in a way that, I think, implicitly and explicitly renders non-binary people invisible. So, that's a
10 really big . . .
- 11 AJ: How so?
- 12 ML: Well, for example, if you go to a gendered space and it only has gendered restrooms, I think that's a
13 really overt way of saying that there is no space for non-binary folks here. Or, when folks mis-gender
14 me or insist on using, or insist on the fact that singular they is grammatically incorrect. Folks are
15 saying that grammar is more important than acknowledging a person's existence.
- 16 AJ: So, you said the singular use of they.
- 17 ML: Yeah.
- 18 AJ: Yeah, no . . . right. The suggestion is that grammar, correct grammar, is more important than your
19 humanity. Yeah.
- 20 ML: Yes, totally.
- 21 AJ: What have been some of the more positive aspects?
- 22 ML: I think the biggest one is finally finding a word and a name and an identity that feels good for me.
23 When I wasn't holding that identity outwardly, publicly, I always felt like I was not really grounded in
24 an identity that worked for me. Previously, people would refer to me as a woman and I would tell
25 people I was a woman, but I didn't feel 100%. So, now it feels 100%.
- 26 AJ: You feel whole.
- 27 ML: Yeah.
- 28 AJ: Complete?
- 29 ML: Yeah.
- 30 AJ: That's awesome. Wow. So, to the extent that you feel comfortable discussing this, have you had
31 and/or have plans for any sort of medical interventions as a way to . . . I don't know, further enhance
32 your identity?

- 1 ML: Yeah. I think that I'm still trying to play with it about what's possible for me. I do feel like if I were to
2 have top surgery that would feel more . . . I would feel more whole, not that I don't feel whole right
3 now. But, then, I also want kids so I need to do some research about what it looks like to parent . . .
4 or what breastfeeding looks like with a kiddo.
- 5 AJ: Sure. So, to date, though, no hormonal therapy or no surgeries or anything like that?
- 6 ML: No.
- 7 AJ: Speaking of kiddos, are you in a relationship?
- 8 ML: I am. I'm in a committed, loving relationship with my person.
- 9 AJ: Wonderful. How does your person identify?
- 10 ML: My person identifies as . . . I'm terrible for forgetting what the language is that she uses. I think she
11 says gender queer. But, I would double-check with her.
- 12 AJ: But, she/her pronouns.
- 13 ML: And they/them.
- 14 AJ: How long have you guys been together?
- 15 ML: A year and a month.
- 16 AJ: What are some of the challenges of dating as a non-binary, gender non-conforming person that goes
17 by they/them pronouns? Or, are there any challenges? It could be that everybody is down with that
18 and you just have to beat off all your other potential suitors, I don't know.
- 19 ML: Yeah, I think . . . well, in a relationship where we're getting to know each other, I think it's just about
20 learning what we need from each other physically, emotionally and in other ways. I guess, one of
21 the things we have to learn about each other is how we like to be touched, how we like to be
22 referred to when we're talking about each other's bodies, how do we want to talk about each
23 other's bodies when we're being physically intimate, when we're having sex. So, those I wouldn't
24 say are challenges, but . . .
- 25 AJ: Aspects.
- 26 ML: Learning curves, yeah. And then, I'd say that, you know, prior to being in that committed
27 relationship, or even just looking for people before I met Namisha, I think a lot of spaces are really
28 gendered, a lot of folks use social media apps to meet people and I remember there is the Tinder, I
29 guess, is what I think it's called that's really hot.
- 30 AJ: Yeah, I've never used it. That's kind of sad to say but . . .

- 1 ML: And, I know that that's . . . you have to specify within the binary when you sign up for that, so I know
2 that there's folks who have to answer that question and identify inconsistent with their gender
3 identity in order to meet people. So, there's those types of barriers too.
- 4 AJ: Sure, yeah. How did you come out to your family and friends?
- 5 ML: How did I . . . I think it was, in terms of coming out with my gender identity, I think it was just having
6 conversations with people one-on-one about how I identified. And then, eventually word spreads
7 and, at some point, I was like, "Hey, everyone, FYI, this is how I identify," on social media to kind of
8 get to acquaintances. And then with my family, I just had one-on-one conversations with them.
9 And, when I say family, I'm thinking about my sisters really and my aunt. Beyond that, folks don't
10 really know.
- 11 AJ: In your family?
- 12 ML: Yes.
- 13 AJ: OK. Family members do talk, you know.
- 14 ML: They do – yeah, they do talk.
- 15 AJ: I'm just saying. But, you have not told them personally.
- 16 ML: No, I haven't. I know that other folks have heard rumblings about my identity. I know that there's
17 some folks who don't really want anything to do with it or don't want to talk about it.
- 18 AJ: So, you mentioned to me before we started rolling that your ethnic identity is Cambodian, Chinese,
19 and Vietnamese.
- 20 ML: Yes.
- 21 AJ: How does that play a role in your gender identity? If it does – it may not, I don't know. But, what do
22 you think that means or how does it impact your gender identity, I should say?
- 23 ML: I guess the first thing that comes to mind is when I think, particularly, about my Cambodian ancestry.
24 My grandmother, who immigrated here from Cambodia during the genocide that happened there in
25 the 1970s, had to go through a lot of tribulations to get here and to have a right to live. She was, in
26 many ways, being persecuted. My grandfather died of starvation because he was a . . . he was
27 targeted because he was an intellectual, he was a musician, and so the Khmer Rouge targeted folks
28 like that. So, when I think about that ancestry, that part of my lineage, I think that I come naturally
29 from a bloodline of knowing what we deserve, and in that way, when I insist upon folks respecting
30 my gender identity, I have that kind of framework in mind – a refusal to be anything other than what
31 I deserve to be.
- 32 AJ: Sure. When is the first time you ever met a transgender or gender non-conforming, non-binary
33 person?

- 1 ML: The first time, huh? I mean, I probably have met many . . .
- 2 AJ: And didn't know.
- 3 ML: And didn't know, right. But, I remember someone . . . so, when I first moved to Minnesota, I
4 volunteered at the Sexual Violence Center, and I remember someone asking me what my gender
5 pronouns were and I told them she/her and that person responded and said that they go by
6 they/them. And so, I want to say that that person is the first person that really explicitly told me that
7 they were gender non-conforming. It's a local.
- 8 AJ: Yeah. Do you remember who that person is?
- 9 ML: Cheré.
- 10 AJ: Oh, wow, that's funny. Cheré Bergeron.
- 11 ML: Yes.
- 12 AJ: OK. And, did that have an impact on you?
- 13 ML: I think it had a huge impact, actually. At that point is really when I started to think about who I was,
14 what my gender was, in a specific way. It really dawned on me that there were possibilities beyond
15 what I thought there were, in terms of gender identity.
- 16 AJ: Right. You mentioned you volunteered at the Sexual Violence Center. Have you ever worked for or
17 volunteered . . . well, clearly you work for, now. Any LGBT-specific groups or any trans or gender
18 non-conforming specific groups other than the Center for Queer and . . .? How do you . . .?
- 19 ML: The GSC. The Gender and Sexuality Center for Queer and Trans.
- 20 AJ: Got it.
- 21 ML: Well, I know that I volunteered for Lobby Day at OutFront one day. I just got an email and I was like,
22 "OK, I'll be there."
- 23 AJ: Sure.
- 24 ML: I don't think I have actually.
- 25 AJ: Well, you mentioned that you're on the Trans Commission here at the University.
- 26 ML: Yes, so I served as the Chair of the Trans Commission, which is now the Trans Advisory and Action
27 Team for two or three years. And then I also . . . for a little bit, I was doing some letter writing for
28 Black and Pink, or for someone who I was connected to through Black and Pink.
- 29 AJ: What's Black and Pink?

- 1 ML: Black and Pink is an organization that connects folks on the inside, so people who are incarcerated,
2 who are trans and gender non-conforming and, I think, to folks on the outside for organizing and
3 capacity building and support. So, for a little bit I was doing some letter writing with someone there.
- 4 AJ: What do you think the relationship is between the L, G, B and then the T, which, I'm using the T to
5 encompass gender non-conforming, non-binary. Do you think there is a connection within those
6 communities? Should there be a stronger connection? Should there not be a connection? What's
7 your thoughts about that?
- 8 ML: I think the connection is kind of . . . it's tense and it's rooted in a history of exclusion. So, prioritizing
9 LGB concerns over trans concerns. And, I think our history shows that trans issues and trans folks are
10 kind of left on the back burner, if you will, when it comes to large-scale advocacy.
- 11 AJ: Very true. But do you think trans folks should keep trying to struggle in that framework or . . .?
- 12 ML: Yeah, I think that trans folks . . . I mean, I'm more aligned with folks who are queer and who identify
13 as queer, because, in my mind, queer is very political and signals certain things – like it signals anti-
14 white supremacy, depending on the spectrum. It signals a political consciousness, it signals a
15 resistance to the status quo that is harmful. So, I think that if I were to kind of lead the trajectory of
16 the trans agenda, or whatever, it would be a very queer trans agenda.
- 17 AJ: Wow, that's a frame that I'm not sure if I've heard in terms of the political nature of queer identity.
18 You used the word anti-white supremacist, which leads me to the issues of the day, which is . . . not
19 that white supremacy is some new concept, but it certainly has been forefront in our national
20 discussion for the past week or so with the events in Charlottesville, Virginia, where Ku Klux Klan
21 members marched through the streets and there was a violent confrontation and a young woman,
22 Heather Heyer, was murdered or killed. Yeah, talk to me about how are you feeling in this moment
23 as a queer person of color.
- 24 ML: Honestly, I feel like I'm kind of . . . I think what's happening right now is that I'm overwhelmed with
25 the media and with the chilling-ness of the situation. I'm overwhelmed with how easily it is to feel
26 powerless or f'ed up about what has happened and what has been happening. So, I think I'm just
27 really grappling with where I am in position to what's happening and what I'm going to go, what I can
28 do.
- 29 AJ: What do you think we, collectively, need to do?
- 30 ML: I guess when I think about we, I'm like, "Who's we?" It's so . . . I feel like on a political spectrum, I'm
31 pretty radical and so I've been thinking about how I don't want to fraternize with people who are
32 apologists, white supremacy apologists, rape apologists. And so, when I think about we, I tend to
33 think about people who are politically like-minded in that radical way and so we collectively need to
34 tear shit up and down.
- 35 AJ: OK, yes.

- 1 ML: And so, I wonder if there is the mass mobility, mass momentum there or if . . . I mean, my big
2 question is do we have folks who are like . . . riot or dies? Do you know what I mean? Because in my
3 mind, that's what I am and that's what I'm committed to in terms of abolishing white supremacy and
4 it sustains or . . . not to say that I want to erase history per se, but I want to honor it and reconcile.
- 5 AJ: Yes.
- 6 ML: Yeah, we need to tear shit down and we need to tear it up and we need to be unapologetic and
7 ready to sacrifice. As somebody who comes from that type of culture, that type of lineage – my
8 grandfather died of . . . he died from hunger because he gave his food to his kids.
- 9 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 10 ML: So, that's where I come from and so, I think we need more people like that.
- 11 AJ: If we tear it down, are you about building something new in its place?
- 12 ML: Yeah, yeah – absolutely. Something new, something radically different.
- 13 AJ: Not just rubble everywhere.
- 14 ML: No, not just rubble everywhere. It's really hard for me to think that we can have the type of freedom
15 that we want and deserve, the type of freedom where everyone gets what they want and need on
16 this foundation that has yet to even do things like bring down structures that represent white
17 supremacy, these Confederate monuments and things like that. So, that's one of the reasons why I
18 think we need to tear it all down before we do anything.
- 19 AJ: Well, I definitely understand and appreciate that perspective. What do you think the agenda for the
20 transgender community should be going forward in your mind?
- 21 ML: The agenda for the trans community.
- 22 AJ: Since you are the chair of the Trans Advisory?
- 23 ML: I was, no longer.
- 24 AJ: Oh, OK.
- 25 ML: I think it really has to be intersectional. I think it has to be intersectional in its strategies and its goals.
26 And, that means a commitment to abolishing white supremacy and all of its remnants and also, by
27 the same token, lifting up the perspective and the needs and desires of IPOC communities and
28 indigenous people and people of color.
- 29 AJ: IPOC communities? Indigenous people of color.
- 30 ML: Indigenous people and people of color, yeah.

- 1 AJ: Wow. That's . . . yeah, that's definitely a radical way of looking at it. It's not radical in my mind,
2 however it is . . . I think many people would consider that. I haven't heard it framed like that, in
3 terms of IPOC. Where does that come from?
- 4 ML: Well, I think . . . so, I remember when POIC surfaced, so P-o-i-c. I feel like if I could turn back time, I
5 would like to study linguistics or something because I really think that the way we use language is
6 extremely powerful. So, I just didn't want indigenous folks to be . . . I don't ever want indigenous
7 sovereignty or indigenous repatriation or respect to be an afterthought. And so, that's why I like to
8 put "I" in the front.
- 9 AJ: Sure, that makes sense. Has there been a specific moment or person or organization, and I guess
10 you did kind of mention this when you talked about your meeting with Chéré. But, are there any
11 other organizations or groups that really had an impact on your gender expression? Or individuals?
- 12 ML: That's a really good question.
- 13 AJ: That's my job – asking questions.
- 14 ML: I mean, I feel like . . . honestly, I feel like my grandma – oh, and the other person, actually, is my aunt.
15 My aunt is the second oldest, her name is Tita also, and yes . . .
- 16 AJ: Tita also, is that your grandmother's name?
- 17 ML: Yeah. And so, she really pushes gender norms in subtle but really cool ways.
- 18 AJ: How so?
- 19 ML: Like when she . . . there's a word when you're responding to someone and if you're a boy you say it
20 bod and if you're a girl you say ja and so she's raised two boys but she'll still say bod when she's
21 responding to people, even though she's a woman. So, that type of thing. So, yeah.
- 22 AJ: And you picked up on that?
- 23 ML: I did pick up on that.
- 24 AJ: Yeah, and it intrigued you in some way.
- 25 ML: Yeah, it intrigued me. Yeah, I think I just really appreciate folks who are unapologetic about who
26 they are and I think anyone who does that is my . . . anyone who is apologetic about who they are
27 and what they stand for or what they believe in . . . you know, with exception.
- 28 AJ: Sure. Because there are some pretty unapologetic white supremacists out there who stand on what
29 they believe and they believe that queer, Black and brown or IPOC people should be erased off the
30 planet.
- 31 ML: Right, with exception.

- 1 AJ: OK.
- 2 ML: Yeah, those folks or the folks I'm thinking about are really the ones who've kind of helped shape me
3 into being who I am with my gender.
- 4 AJ: Got it. Where do you think the gender non-conforming, transgender, non-binary community will be
5 50 years from now?
- 6 ML: Hmm. Where do I think they'll be? I have no idea. Actually, I do think that trans and gender non-
7 conforming folks are going to hold a lot more positional power in terms of governmental positions
8 and things like that. So, I think that that's going to continue . . .
- 9 AJ: Which will shift culture, if that happens.
- 10 ML: Absolutely. So, I think that that's going to be one thing that our community is going to experience 50
11 years from now. And, beyond that, I'm not really sure what is going to happen. I feel like violence
12 and murder is going to continue, violence and murder of trans folks, particularly trans women of
13 color, is going to continue.
- 14 AJ: That's sad. Why do you think so?
- 15 ML: Because it is, at this rate, continuing at a horrendous . . .
- 16 AJ: I just want to shout out the 17th murder happened yesterday. A trans woman, a young white
17 woman, so we have to lift them up and acknowledge . . . but, yeah. It's sad and unfortunate. I'm
18 hoping for a future where that is not the reality but, at this point, it still is. Melinda, is there anything
19 that I didn't ask you that you feel like you really want to make sure is a part of this conversation?
- 20 ML: I wonder . . . I think that something that I'm thinking about a lot is how rape culture comes into the
21 equation and what our role in the queer and trans community is as it relates to abolishing rape
22 culture. I think that I would really like more attention paid to that and how that type of work is
23 necessary for trans liberation – queer and trans liberation.
- 24 AJ: So, you know, keep in mind that this video tape will be witnessed by a number of people who may
25 not be as enlightened as you. How do you define rape culture?
- 26 ML: Rape culture is any type of . . . rape culture is any type of behavior, institutional structure,
27 covert/overt action that condones violence and perpetuates violence on people. I want to say that
28 that's my answer on bodies, on people's bodies. And, when I say bodies, I mean that . . .
- 29 AJ: So, non-consensual.
- 30 ML: Non-consensual, yes. Thanks for that.
- 31 AJ: Yeah. Well, I mean I absolutely agree that addressing that will be an integral part to trans and
32 gender non-conforming liberation as we continue to move forward on our quest for, I think, the

- 1 fullest humanity that we can have on this planet. Wow, well, I just want to say thank you so much
2 for this opportunity to sit down and share . . .
- 3 ML: Thank you.
- 4 AJ: Maybe one final question. Has your gender identity, how has it impacted your professional life?
5 Because you have a pretty great job right now. And, I don't know, has it always been easy for you to
6 find employment?
- 7 ML: Yeah, that's a big thing. You mentioned that at the roundtable yesterday and I think . . . it's hard. It's
8 hard navigating the work world as a transgender non-conforming person and to be authentic about
9 who you are and also know that you need to get a job and sometimes that means you have to code
10 switch, that means you have to be dishonest about who you are. I was in a role for about eight years
11 . . . well, definitely less than that – more like five or six, where I wasn't out to my co-workers. When
12 you work in a place that serves women, women who experience chemical dependency, it's like to say
13 that you're . . . I don't know, it was hard. It's hard.
- 14 AJ: And women who have been impacted by rape culture, I would suspect. I say that just because most
15 women have been, either directly or indirectly. Yeah, it's a challenge. But, you're able to show up
16 here as your full self and in a university, academic setting. Clearly there have been some roads that
17 have been cleared to make that possible and so hopefully you'll keep cutting down the bush and the
18 brush . . .
- 19 ML: Right, with my . . .
- 20 AJ: . . . and clearing the path. With your what?
- 21 ML: Is it a sith or a scythe?
- 22 AJ: With your scythe, yes.
- 23 ML: My glitter scythe.
- 24 AJ: And make a way for folks coming up behind you.
- 25 ML: Absolutely.
- 26 AJ: Thank you, Melinda.
- 27 ML: Thank you so much.
- 28 AJ: Peace out.
- 29 ML: Peace out.