

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

EI MEEKER

Interviewer: Nadia Awad

Date of Interview: October 9, 2017

Location of Interview: Ei's home

Transcribed by Ariana Blondo

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #020

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Nadia Awad: It is October, 9 2017. And I am interviewing Ei Meeker for the New York Trans Oral History Project. Which seeks to collect stories from, uh, the lives of trans and gender not-conforming New Yorkers as told in their own words. Uh, thank you so much for agreeing to participate [laughter]. Um, and uh, I guess a good place to start would be, uh, tell me where you were born and um, describe that place a little bit for me.

Ei Meeker: St. Louis [Missouri].

Awad: Okay.

Meeker: Um, 1967. Um, I only lived there, like, four years, and when I was two my family- my father was a journalist and he had a fellowship to write about urban development in Europe. So my parents and three kids packed up a car and went to- for a year they spent- we spent a year in most of the major capitals. And it's interesting because I realize that my parents were in their mid-to-late twenties at that point. They had three kids, and they sort of missed 1968, like everything that happened here. Um, and came back to St. Louis, um, and shortly after that moved to Northeast Ohio, and that's where I grew up. Until I came to college at Fordham [University] in New York City.

Awad: Wow. So, do you- do you have any recollections of your time abroad?

Meeker: No. [Laughter] I know my mother was really hopeful that I would become, like, multilingual, but I didn't develop any language including English. So I actually have a speech- a tape of speech therapy- I was in speech therapy until I was in third grade or so. I was really, um, delayed developmentally with speech. Um, I sort of made my own language. Like there was an early tape, I think I was five or six, of her- of my mom giving me like, uh, you know speaking to me on a cassette tape and I don't understand a word that I'm saying, but my mother did so... And now I'm an English teacher so it's interesting how that happens. I use that to talk to my students who are all newcomers that are learning English, I tell them that story as a, you know, a paradox of how you can...

Awad: That's amazing.

Meeker: Yeah.

Awad: Um, wow. I- I have a friend actually whose child is going through, uh, similar challenges with speech and this sort of thing so should tell her that- [Laughter] how things can change really dramatically. But, um, can you tell me a little bit about your parents and what they did? Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Meeker: Sure. Um, my mom is, um, still lives in Akron [Ohio], where I'm from. Um, she was Italian and Russian, and her parents and grandparents came to work in factories in Northeast Ohio. So her dad worked in a rubber factory, Goodrich Tire, and her mom I think worked in a department store. Um, and she grew up in the Italian neighborhood. My father was Irish and German. More,

uh, much more culturally Irish, and his relatives also came to work. Uh, his parents owned, like, a kitchen cabinet business. So, um, I believe they were the first- yeah, they were the first generation to go to college. Uh, my father went to Kent State and majored in journalism and um, then became a public relations executive and had his own firm. Um, and my mom was a nutritionist, like a dietician. Yeah, and she worked for the county- Summit County, the WIC program for most of her career.

Awad: What is the WIC program?

Meeker: It's women, infants, and children. It's um, for low income women who are pregnant or have young children, nutrition program.

Awad: And that was based just in Ohio? Or was it...

Meeker: No, it was a federal program, yeah.

Awad: And so, so you have pretty deep roots in Akron, Ohio.

Meeker: Yeah, I grew up there, yeah.

Awad: Can you, um, describe it for me?

Meeker: It's quite hip now! You know, I just saw a- there was a *Huffington Post* [magazine] it was, um, one of the artsiest places to live now as a small city. How can I describe it? Um, you know my parents I think bought their house in 1973 when my brother was just born. We moved from St. Louis- we went to Columbus, Ohio and then we moved back to Akron because that's where my parents' families were and I think they bought their house for \$80,000. It was uh, like a Georgian revival, it was a mansion. You know you go back now and you're like 'Wow! This is like an amazing place to grow up.' But it was, you know, middle class, um, integrated in a good way. You know, I went to Catholic school um, I went to a very sports heavy high school. Um, and played a lot of sports in high school, like that was a big part of the culture. Um, I didn't appreciate it as a kid growing up there. I mean, I was happy there growing up, but now when I go back I realize it has a lot to offer, more than I realized when I was younger. Yeah.

Awad: And can you tell me a little bit about what sorts of ideas about, you know, what boys should be doing and girls should be doing you received as a young person growing up in Akron, Ohio and attending Catholic schools? [laughter]

Meeker: Yeah, it's interesting because I- when I started my transition I- I went through every photograph I had of myself as a kid and I kept finding these pictures of myself in really nonconforming clothing. But I never, um, felt as a kid pressure to um, fit into like a gender role. It's really interesting. I'm the third child, and I have a younger brother, so I went from being the youngest daughter to the oldest son, you know, when I transitioned. And a couple months into my transition my father passed away. So, um, I asked my mom- like when I started looking at the

photos- I hadn't come out to her, but I- I had asked her, I said: Do you remember dressing me? When I was small, like did I want to wear the clothes I was wearing? Or did you put them on me, or was there any issue? Because a lot of, you know, trans kids really have issues with that, but I never felt identified as a boy when I was younger. I was just me, but my gender role was never very feminine. Like I, um, we come from a family who you know, fished, went camping, I played sports, I mowed the lawn. You know, I did like, typical boy things sorta, but I was never um, I never felt like pressure from my parents, which I am so grateful for. You know I don't know if... you'd like to think that... mothers especially sort of have an intuition about their children. So, I asked my mom, I said: 'Did you dress me in these little boys' clothes, or did I wanna wear them, or what was going on?' And they were very gender-neutral colors and, you know, I see pictures of like, you know just the '70's; like, the polyester collars and the brown pants. And she sent back this email, she sends back three emails in a row, like stream of consciousness emails, and I was like: 'Wow, she's really thought about this. Like a lot's coming out. But I never really, you know I didn't say anything to her, but she was saying: 'Oh, it was the '60's!' and 'We, um, women's liberation, and we didn't want to um, force anybody to wear anything they didn't want to wear. Like she had these- this rationale for what I was wearing, and I was like 'Wow, she's... this is um, I hit something.' [Laughter] Um, so then I was able to actually bring that up, like a few months later when I came out to her like, 'Remember when I asked you about my clothing?' And you know... because my therapist even asked me, he was like, 'Did you- did you reject girls' clothes?' I said, 'I don't remember feeling that way at all. It's just who I was.' And, um, you my father passed away. Before he died he was unconscious, but I sort of said goodbye to him and I thanked him for not like, gender- you know forcing me into like a gender stereotype. I don't think he did that to any of us, but I think, growing up my two older sisters were more feminine. Yeah, you know, just by choice. Um, so it's just interesting to think back. Like what came first, you know. I do think it's something engrained in, like a child, to just see the world in a certain way.

Awad: And so, you were growing up in the '70's, what...did you... I know your parents did not pressure you into fitting in a certain- or weren't rigid, at least gave you some space. And I'm just wondering, did you have exposure to some of these other ideas that your mom referenced? You know, because this is also a time before the Internet, you're growing up in a smaller city...

Meeker: Yeah, it's so interesting. Um, you know I'm gonna go see Battle of the Sexes with a friend of mine this week, and I was thinking...

Awad: With Billie Jean King?

Meeker: I- I remember her being the first out, like, lesbian that I had heard of.

Awad: How old were you at the time?

Meeker: Probably like nine or ten. Um, and then I also remember- one day my father came home from work- it's so interesting because I asked my mom about this, if she had remembered. She didn't. I was maybe twelve, probably seventh or eighth grade, and we were at the dinner table and he was talking about a person he worked with, and he said you know, whatever their name

is, came into the meeting today and told everybody that he's, uh, wants to be referred to as a woman and changed his name to a woman. And I don't unders- he wasn't judgmental about it, like I remember as a kid thinking, 'Oh, I'm gonna listen to what he says,' but I didn't know why I was so curious about his opinion. It's like wild. And he wasn't like judgmental or transphobic, he just didn't understand it, you know? And he, but he was respectful of the person. But it's interesting, um, like you pick up these messages as a kid about homophobia or transphobia or gender roles without even realizing you're doing it. You know.

Awad: But you remember Billie Jean King.

Meeker: Yeah, yeah. And then I had, um, basketball coaches and Girl Scout leaders, like the typical like, you know strong women who I wanted to be like. You know I- they were different than a lot of the other women in my life I guess? Although I- I don't- can't remember, like a hyper female relative, you know; um, or subservient like women at all. Like they were- all my female relatives are like strong and independent so... but I gravitated towards the more masculine ones as like who I wanted to emulate, yeah.

Awad: And so, so you're in high school, you're playing a lot of sports, you were exposed to Billie Jean King around twelve, you're growing up in a family that's giving you a little bit of space, um to sort of not be super... whatever, whichever direction, basically. Um, and so, tell me a little bit about what brought to New York, you said you came for Fordham? [University]

Meeker: Yeah, uh, for college. Yeah, I specifically wanted to move to New York, I don't really know why. I didn't know what I wanted to do, I knew I wanted to study, um, Liberal Arts and I was Catholic, I went to Catholic school, and my father and I were looking through college books and he said 'Oh, that's a good school- it's Catholic.' And um, yeah in my- I was the first child in my family to go away. You know, my other, um, my other siblings went to Kent State um, and my brother went to the University of Cincinnati; so, they sort of stayed locally. But for my parents, you know, it's amazing to think, like it was the mid-80's, enabling me to just- I didn't know anybody, you know I just came here, so... yeah.

Awad: And, can you describe what your first year in New York was like?

Meeker: Um, [sigh] gosh.

Awad: I know that's a big question, but...

Meeker: I would take, you know I would take the D train, it was when the D train went all the way up to Fordham Road down to West Fourth Street, and just walk in circles around The Village. Like I would get lost and I would just walk around. But I was curious about... I- I sort of- [incoherent]. Soon after I started college, I identified as like a bisexual or a lesbian. And then, I think when I was a Sophomore, that's 1986, like the AIDS crisis, I was in the middle of the AIDS crisis, and hung out with mostly gay boys, um on campus. Um, it's amazing to think about... we had a student group called FLAG, Fordham Lesbians and Gays, and it was undercover, because it

wasn't um, supported by the administration. And, so we would meet, and, and hangout and go out or have meeti- you know, do cultural things together. Um, but when, I was more aware of like HIV and AIDS, I um, sort of like got consumed by that. Yeah, on campus and also outside of campus, yeah.

Awad: Do you remember the first time you heard about HIV or AIDS?

Meeker: Yeah, well, ironically it was in Ohio. Um, my father's frat, big brother, his fraternity at Kent State, um, was infected and he lived in LA, and he was gay. You know back then that was like very, like you were gay and with a partner or... but you weren't really out, you know it was very different. Um, and I also was always enamored with him, he would come visit once in a while 'cause his family lived in Ohio. So, when he travelled to London [England], he was an antique dealer, um, back to LA he would stay with us. And... he played the piano and he was funny and I was like enamored with him and he moved back to Ohio, I think when I was maybe a senior in high school, because he was sick; but nobody really talked about why, um, and I helped him around his house and mowed his lawn and stuff like that. Um, and then I went to college and he died, like, I think in 1986.

Awad: When you were a sophomore.

Meeker: Yeah. And that's when people started to quickly, um... things started to change rapidly, it seemed like. But I learned about ACT UP, like my AIDS activism, when I was, um I had an internship at McMillan Publishing, in the children's book section, and there was somebody there who, um, was in ACT UP really early on and... it was the year, it was 1988 when, um., Al Gore and Paul Simon were running for President and Jesse Jackson. And Fordham [University] was hosting a debate for the Democratic National Committee, and this man I worked with asked me if I could help them get onto campus to go to the debate. And I- we couldn't do it, but I was like, 'Ooh, what is this group?' and then I got involved after that. Because I had noticed the homophobia on campus. Um, and the AIDS phobia on campus, yeah.

Awad: Now when we... when we started talking you... you were, you had mentioned 'Oh, you know my parents were in their twenties and then they went to Europe and they missed 1968, and they missed Kent State.' I'm wondering, can you, at this point, can you talk to me a little bit about that and, you know, did your... did your parents have... are you trying to say that they missed sort of that activist moment? And that they didn't quite have that in them?

Meeker: Yeah, well it's interesting because my, um, my father particularly, was like a very active Democrat. He was a delegate for Jimmy Carter and he was the chair of the Ohio Democratic National Committee and... they were a little older, like I have aunts and uncles that are maybe five or eight years younger who were in college in the '60's and my parents had already gone on and they had three kids and they were working. So they were, like removed from I guess, from that tumult, you know, that was happening. Um, so, I guess it's connected because I... like I never heard growing up, like homophobic ideas from my family, but still, like when you come out... and

I identified as queer like thirty years ago, but I never came out to my parents, like I would never... I wasn't even able to go there, and I have...

Awad: How come?

Meeker: Just fear of rejection. Or judgment, you know.

Awad: Yeah, for sure. I'm just wondering where that intense fear came from if your parents... if you... you didn't experience like...

Meeker: I think the Catholicism. I think the Ca-... like, my upbringing, yeah. Um, but like when I transitioned I knew I had to come out. So it was a very different... you know I came out to my mother as gay and trans at the same time, sort of, you know. So I have male partners so, um, yeah I mean that was... I was able to sh-... my family knew like I was an ally, or very dedicated to equality, um, but I was able to sort of hide behind it, you know. Being straight... I never identified as being straight, but what people perceive is very different, yeah.

Awad: So, what... what spurred you given the, you know this, uh... Catholic upbringing, it's your first time in this big city [New York], the AIDS crisis is happening, how did you go from sort of that context in Akron, Ohio to 'I'm going to join ACT UP, I'm going to be part of this underground gay mafia at Fordham' [laughter]?

Meeker: I mean, it was, you know just...

Awad: How do you make sense of that?

Meeker: ...to see like, um, the homophobia, you know, there were like...

Awad: Can you tell me stories?

Meeker: Um, not only homophobia, but misogyny. I mean, like for instance, um, I hope it's different now, but when I was there [Fordham University], you know they had like the health clinic for students that didn't do much. You know if you needed like a gyne [gynecology] exam they would send you off campus in the South Bronx to like a community health clinic. Which was, sorta, not very accessible. Um, I was on the Fordham Helpline which was like a crisis prevention hotline that was peer-run and, um, faculty from the Psych [Psychology] department trained us and we were like crisis counselors on the phone, and we give out... if- if a woman called and said 'I need birth control' or 'I need an abortion' or 'I'm pregnant and I don't know what to do.' We gave them like Planned Parenthood's phone number. And I remember, as the president of Fordham Helpline, I went to Lincoln Center, we have a campus on Lincoln Center, to advertise our services and the director of the counseling center there... this is in 1989, I think because I was a senior, um, said 'why would we advertise? You're- you're promoting abortion.' And I was like 'Man, this is...' And it was like, you know, the Jesse Helms Era, Edwin Neese, the pornography anti-co-... you know, it was like the really right-wing Reagan times.

Awad: I don't... I don't know that second reference, Edward...?

Meeker: Edwin Neese. He... they were Ronald Reagan's like, right hand, you know... he had a, um, a commission, anti-pornography commission, but also just right-wing, like religious... the religious right [wing] were becoming more powerful. Um, and I don't think of the Jesuits as a right-wing, but compared to, um... just it wasn't a very friendly environment to be gay or queer on campus in the '80's. [Laughter] You know, um, so, so, I graduated with an English degree, and my first job was at Covenant House. Do you know what Covenant House is? Do you know the story behind Covenant House?

Awad: No, can you tell us... tell us what Covenant House is, and, and the story just so...

Meeker: In a nutshell, [Laughter] oh gosh. Um, they were founded by a Franciscan priest, he's dead now, Bruce Ritter, and he was very right-wing, and had... they were extremely well-funded by like, business people. Um, he was on the Anti-Pornography Commission for, I think Bush Sr. or Ronald Reagan, but um, it's a homeless shelter. So it's like a... they had... when I worked there, um, they had Covenant Houses in several US cities and also um, in some other countries, and um... but very conservative Catholic, like at the base, but they were doing good work for homeless kids. But, for instance, when you start there, I did fundraising, um, you're encouraged to go on their... their van, they have a van that patrols the city and gives out food and helps teenagers that are on the street so... and it was like in the middle of the crack epidemic, so we went to Harlem and we went, you know, to the South Bronx, and then we went to the piers on the West side. And there were a lot of like hustlers, like teenagers, looking for condoms. And I remember I was in this van and they were like 'oh, we can't give you...we don't give condoms out, but we have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, do you want some food?' and I'm like 'What's wrong with this picture?' Um, and then I was sitting at my desk one day, it's like 1990, and I wasn't really that active in ACT UP yet. I had heard of them, and I had heard of WHAM, do you know WHAM? Women's Health Action Mobilization, they were like an offshoot, a women's offshoot of ACT UP, and then um, WAC was the Women's Action Coalition. So these affinity groups, they were outside my window protesting that Covenant House didn't give birth control or um, pregnancy prevention because they're Catholic- their bylaws. And I was sitting there thinking 'What's... I should really be down there instead of here raising money for this place.' And then soon after there was a scandal at Covenant House where, um, one of the residents accused Bruce Ritter of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct and he was found guilty of that, and it led to like a load of like a year's worth of, um, investigation by the newspapers on financial impropriety and... so, so anyway I left there and I started working AIDS services, and I worked there until became a teacher. Yeah, for like fifteen years or so.

Awad: When you say you worked in AIDS services, what, uh, organization did you work for?

Meeker: I started with Bailey House. The AIDS- called the AIDS Resource Center back then, and they were a really grassroots housing organization, they were literally funded by, like gay activists in The Village who helped homeless, homeless people with AIDS, um, when they got kicked out

of their apartments. Because they had AIDS, their landlords would kick them out, or, um, discriminate against them. So, so Bailey House is a residence on Christopher Street, it's still there, um, they also have scatterset apartments, so I started there doing fundraising. And then I moved to San Francisco, as one does [laughter], often from New York and I worked for Project Inform, which was a treatment organization, a lot of great activists there. And then I moved back to New York and I worked for the HIV Law Project, um, which was founded by Terry McGovern, who was an amazing lesbian AIDS activist. She filed a class-action lawsuit against the CDC, against the federal government when the definition of AIDS only included... it was including mostly like gay white men, and they were opportunistic infections that women experienced, and that people of color, or IV drug users had that weren't in the definition, therefore, people of color and women weren't getting access to the services that, um, men were. And, they changed, they changed the policy based on that, it was amazing. And then after that I worked for the Alpha Workshops, which is still around, which is a design studio, which stemmed out of Bailey House. There was this, um, a social worker there who was also a fabric painter, and when AIDS came, he became a social worker, and he founded his own design studio that employs and trains people with HIV. So, yeah.

Awad: Wow. So, HIV and AIDS really shaped your time in New York in a fundamental way.

Meeker: Yeah... yeah.

Awad: Did you lose a lot of friends to HIV and AIDS?

Meeker: Um... you know it's interesting, the first friend I had who was positive was actually a friend from high school. A woman, a straight woman. Um, which is ironic, you know, it was like, back when a lot of women weren't being diagnosed. Um, and she's healthy, she's great, she lives in Michigan. Um, but yeah, definitely, with um... I remember, like opening the *New York Times*, and you could see, I mean this is not only when like celebrities were dying, but just people who were associated with the organizations I worked with, or um, donors, a lot of donors. Um, since I did fundraising, you know, um... yeah.

Awad: Did you also attend ACT UP meetings at the time? Can you tell me a little bit about what those were like?

Meeker: Yeah. Um, yeah, they were great. I mean they were like democracy in action [laughter]. Um, at the Center, before it was renovated, it's beautiful, but it was like when, um... you know the Keith Haring bathroom is just a wall. Um, they were crowded and the energy was just, um... was pretty incredible. It was easy to get swept into it, like as a young person who wanted to make a difference, because it was so tangible. You know like, you know... I joined the housing committee because I had a background in, um, homelessness, homeless services. So...

Awad: And how old were you- so you had been working at Covenant House, you graduated Fordham [University]...

Meeker: Yeah, I was a like, twenty-four, twenty-three or twenty-four.

Awad: You were twenty-four.

Meeker: Yeah, um... yeah, because I was twenty-four.... Mm I was twenty-four or twenty-five when I moved to San Francisco and I had been working in AIDS for like four years at that point. Yeah, um, ACT UP meetings... it's amazing how... I went to a 'Rise and Resist' meeting recently, and a lot of ACT UP people are there. Original ACT UP people are also involved there, and then, having gone to like, you know after the election and going to meetings where people are trying to organize actions, there's no better experts. And they got, you know, they're Roberts' Rules of Order and everything they used were really from the Women's Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement, so it goes back to like how these mass movements organize themselves. Um, having a voice for everybody, but also, um, having leaders, but anybody could become a leader. You know, I don't know how to explain it. It wasn't anarchy [laughter], but it was also like, heated debates and heated conversations. And then, you know, eventually it split. Um... yeah.

Awad: At that time, were the experiences and needs of trans folk kind of on your radar, too? Or was that not quite...

Meeker: Yes. You know I think about this all the time. The only trans people I knew, was one of my friends, um, de-transitioned. Um, and he... and then, yeah, he... was living as a man, during that time, but before that he had been living as a woman. Um, and then a few trans women, and then I had never met a trans man, or even gender non-conforming. There were like, butch lesbians and gay men. Like that was really, you know... but myself and many people I knew were more on the spectrum and were like bisexual or queer, you know. But even back then, like Queer Nation had started, do you, have you ever heard of Queer Nation? Like that was an offshoot of ACT UP and all that, you know. And that was like a, sort of a radical idea that there's like, the spectrum. You know, yeah.

Awad: Um, did you... were you involved at all? Or... I mean, maybe this is too big a question, but I'm just wondering what... you know, given that your background, your initial experience was doing work around homeless folk living with HIV and AIDS. Was there any effort on the part of ACT UP or any idea maybe that came up with you to sort of like pull more of those people into the organizing or.... Because I don't...

Meeker: Trans people?

Awad: Uh, no, like the homeless folks that you're working with.

Meeker: Yeah, I mean, when I was in ACT UP, we did, um, we did a major action with Emmaus House, which is in Harlem, they were a men's... I think men's shelter, or men and women.

Awad: A what house?

Meeker: Emmaus. Emmaus House. I don't even know if they're still around. Um, on the Day of Desperation, it was like a huge action throughout the city, and there were all these different affinity groups. Um, that was, if you look at Sarah Schulman's documentary [*United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*], you know at the end she, she highlights it, where they all went to Grand Central Station, but I was in a holding cell during that time [laughter]. It was... we had planned this action, it was really good. It was Emmaus House, it was like homeless men, um, a lot who were infected through IV drug use, you know who had a history in the criminal justice system, and then it was like these white East Village ACT UP people. You know, it was an interesting connec-uh... collaboration of like very different people, but we um... they crafted coffins in their woodshop, and then we went to the corner of um, like 145th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard and handcuffed ourselves and got dragged away. Um, but it was really well-coordinated. So yeah, that was very... and that was um... Charles King and people from housing works were really involved in the housing committee, too. That was back then when they just were founded. And they were very grassroots led, you know, client-centered, yeah. So was, and so was Bailey House. We, we weren't as politically... yeah.

Awad: And, um, did you attend ACT UP meetings in San Francisco at all? Or was...

Meeker: No, it's interesting. When I moved to San Francisco, at Project Inform, you know ACT UP San Francisco split. They were ACT UP San Francisco and ACT UP Golden Gate. And ACT UP San Francisco, from what I understand, became more, not anarchist, they wanted to focus more on like alternative health. And ACT UP Golden Gate was more political. So they sort of split into two different groups, yeah.

Awad: Well, ACT UP San Francisco I believe at one point, was claiming that there was not a connection between HIV and AIDS.

Meeker: Yeah, yeah. I think they were considered, sort of, not science-based, and there was a lot of... yeah. So the people I worked with at Project Inform were researchers. Like literally, treatment experts. And that was pretty cool, because I was working there, I only worked there for like a year. Um, but some of the people I met there were really involved in the San Francisco, the Ryan White AIDS Council, and funding for the city. Um, and when protease was discovered, that was like 1996, and I was there during that time so it was like interesting. Because everything shifted. When I got back to New York, and worked at HIV Law Project, the picture of AIDS was changing a lot. Not so much for women and people of color yet, you know, but something had changed.

Awad: So I wanna back up a little bit. When you were working at Covenant House, and Bailey House, and these in New York, where were you living?

Meeker: Carol Gardens. Yeah, which is also very different now [laughter].

Awad: What was Carol Gardens like then?

Meeker: Um, you know I'm twenty-five percent Italian, but I don't, I guess I don't look, I don't look Italian, I don't speak Italian, I guess I felt like an outsider there. Um, you know, I was um, what's the word, heckled or harassed on the street a couple times for being like, masculine. Like it was very old Italiano, you know... Like now when I go past my... I'm like 'wow this is different now. I mean it was safe, if you were a white, it was a safe neighborhood to live in. I hate to you know... Like my African American friends didn't really feel very safe when they visited, or my friends that looked different or um... But yeah, but I've lived in Brooklyn my entire- besides living in the Bronx for college- my entire New York experience, yeah.

Awad: And what, what brought you to San Francisco?

Meeker: Um, you know it was like the mid-'80's and I remember feeling... I was in a relationship and we both sorta wanted to leave. Like it didn't feel so safe and...

Awad: What didn't feel safe?

Meeker: Just the streets. And it was like, um, and just, something new, like I was young and... you know. It was an opportunity to try something new, yeah.

Awad: Because of the crack epidemic? Or because of policing? Or sort of...

Meeker: Um, that was, mmm, I would say more like drugs, like crime. You know it was when David Dinkins was the mayor, who I supported, but there were like, problems, yeah. Yeah, safety-wise, yeah.

Awad: Yeah. So, okay, so you moved to San Francisco. What was... and this is in like the late '80's?

Meeker: '94-'95.

Awad: '94-'95. And so, this is also another time before gentr- real intense gentrification in San Francisco, right?

Meeker: Yeah, you know, I lived in a pretty gentrified neighborhood. Well, it's interesting, we moved to the Lower Haight originally, which was... Oh man, it was ironic, because I thought to myself when we were moving, 'Where else in the country could I live that's a progressive' you know? And I'm glad I lived there, it was beautiful, but I'd never witnessed so much crime, and um, inequity in income as I did in San Francisco. Like it's so noticeable there. I don't know if it's... like it's been... So much... twenty years since I've lived there. But, um...

Awad: I think it's a lot worse now.

Meeker: It's the first time I ever saw... like someone stole my bag, I saw someone hold up somebody with a gun, the homeless problem was extremely disproportionate compared to New York. Like there were many more, like aggressive... mmm I hate to say aggressive, but mentally,

people that need mental health services that are out on the street, that aren't treated. And it's ironic because the second part of my time in San Francisco I worked at UCSF [University of California San Francisco] in the psychiatric institute as a curriculum coordinator and I knew psychiatrists there who were amazing. Who were doing like grassroots work in the Haight with substance use, and HIV, and the research there is like top of the line. Um, but even... like with HIV, too, I think when I lived there, I remember talking to someone at Project Inform and they said there were over 80 AIDS organizations in the city and the highest infection rate. Like what, something's not meshing, you know. So, um, I mean I'm glad I lived there, but I missed the East Coast. So I moved back [laughter]. It's very different, yeah

Awad: I remember reading this book on homelessness that claimed that two-thirds of the homeless population, and this was in um, 2000 I would say that I came across this book, was created after Reagan closed down the state hospitals.

Meeker: Mmhmm, yeah. Like the de-institutionalization. I mean, I actually worked, when I...

Awad: Of state hospitals.

Meeker: Yeah. When I worked, when I came back to New York, I worked for a year or so for Community Access. Which is a great organization that does scattered site housing for people with psychiatric disability. But yeah, because people were de-institutionalized, but there was no sup- there was a lack of supportive housing. Or support services, right.

Awad: So you've worked with people with really intense, complex needs for a really, really long time.

Meeker: Yeah, yeah. Like dual diagnosis, and...

Awad: What drew you to that work?

Meeker: [sigh] I don't, I mean even in me, just even as a kid...

Awad: Jesuit impulses.

Meeker: Yeah, I don't know, I...

Awad: [laughs]

Meeker: I don't know, I just have a lot of compassion for... even when I was at college. You know, I was on the suicide prevention hotline and when I was in high school, I was a Candy Striper and a Girl Scout, and... you know, just the... the uh, desire to help other people, yeah.

Awad: So you come back to New York, and this is, like late '90's?

Meeker: Yeah, '96.

Awad: '96, okay. And um, and so tell me a little bit about... did New York seem different to you? Did New York change? Where did you... I know that's a tough question.

Meeker: Yeah, I feel so old. You know, the turning point, one of the turning points for me, was in Union Square, when Tower Records closed, and they put up that high rise with like the clock on top of it. Now, it's like, Times Square, but back then it was like 'Oh God, what's happening?' You know? But yeah, I guess it- it felt much safer, but when did [Rudy] Giuliani get into office? Was it before Giuliani? I don't even remember. But then that happened so then it was like 'Oh my God.' You know and things got more expensive, you know, independent stores started to clo- you know that shift started to happen. But I love, I mean I've lived here thirty plus years, you know there are still some stores, I'm like 'Oh, I went there when I was in college, it's still there' it's like a miracle, but you know.

Awad: You know one thing I should ask, what are some of the things you did for fun while you were doing all this work in New York?

Meeker: You know...

Awad: Or what are some places you went to?

Meeker: I mean, you know it's interesting, as a young person... I wonder if like, people that are really doing a lot of activist work younger feel this way, but like, sounds sort of... like protests were like our social life. You know, that's what you did. Like you went to an ACT UP meeting and then you went out and you went here and then you did a phone tree, before the Internet you'd have like a phone tree, do you know what a phone tree is?

Awad: Huh-uh.

Meeker: You would get a list of phone numbers, and you'd call, you'd be responsible for calling this person, so like you'd get a message: 'Protest tomorrow 9 O'clock at, you know...' and then you'd call this person, they'd call that person, and then so everybody would find out, yeah. It's amazing what we coordinated without computers, you know. Um, but what else did I do for fun? Just hung out in The Village I guess, and Chelsea, and the East Village. Brooklyn really wasn't hip back then [laughter]. I lived there but I'd go into the city to go out, you know, yeah.

Awad: And, um... and so when did you decide to become an educator?

Meeker: Um, I was working at Alpha Workshops, and I actually got um, sick. I, I have a genetic kidney disease, and it was diagnosed, and I thought to myself... I loved the organization I was working with, but I didn't want to sit in front of a computer and do grant proposals forever. Um, and I'd always in the back of mind been interested in teaching, but I didn't know how to go about it, and then I read about the teaching fellows program and I applied. And I'd told myself if they'd

take me for English, I'll do it. Usually it's like a low, that was like a low... They wanted math or special ed [-ucation] teachers. Um, it was lower in demand to need English, but when I interviewed I got English. So, that was 19... no, that was 2004. So I... No, 2004? 2003? Um, I started teaching when it was 2005. Yeah it was 2004, because I got into the program, and then I went to the training, and I started teaching in 2005. Yeah.

Awad: What do you like best about teaching?

Meeker: Um, I know it sounds very trite, but I do think, you know making... first learning so much about young people. You know I think I learn much more than I teach. But um, but being able to learn together about differences, you know especially in the school... I didn't always teach in an international school, and it's like fascinating to me to learn from them. I mean, I learn from my American students, too, but it's like a different, different...

Awad: Where did you start teaching?

Meeker: Canarsie. My first job was a middle school, I taught sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, um, I taught like the sixth grade Humanities block. SO it was like history, ancient history and English, mixed. 180 minutes a day, so it's like two hours, you know, two and a half hours. And then I taught eighth grade, then I taught seventh grade, and then I went to high school and taught English. Um, but because I had a health background, I was also a massage therapist for a short time, so I had anatomy, I had like this health background and an interest in health, and so the first high school I taught in, which was in East New York, um, I taught Health and English. And I sort of built on that and that's what I teach now, too.

Awad: And, can you talk to me a little bit about, what were some of the challenges your students were facing at that time, in Canarsie, or East New York or, some of the things that, you know, you felt were unique to those?

Meeker: Canarsie, well, it's interesting because the kids in Canarsie were more middle-income Caribbean. So, they had pretty stable families. Um, they, a lot of their parents both worked like middle-income jobs. Um, but when I went to East New York, it was very different. Like very low-income, like a multitude of issues, and it was an example of how a school gets closed. They didn't close it, but I saw for the first time, literally, like the segregation, like how it happens, like how a school gets to be a school where it's under enrolled because it doesn't have much to offer the students. Or they think it doesn't have much to offer them so they don't apply to go there. You know, when you're in eighth grade, you get a big book, and you have to apply to high schools. When I taught eighth grade, I realized that eighth grade students... they're really not knowledgeable enough or mature enough to choose a school, based on anything other than 'Is my friend going to go there?', 'Where is it located?' or 'Do I have to wear a uniform?' Those were the three things! [laughs] Like 'Oh no!' So they picked they're high school, but the high school I taught in then, was like a health focused high school, but it was in a building with three other schools. It was one of Bloomberg's small schools initiative. He, in about 2000, Mayor Bloomberg made a small schools initiative thinking that would fix some things. And I don't know if statistics

prove that, but um, what it did- what I do know is that if your principals don't get along and you have four schools in the building, you're like doomed. Because you have to collaborate and share all the communal spaces. You know, the lunch room, the auditorium, the gymnasium, the teams are all together. Um, but the school where I taught, it had like really committed teachers, and really committed students, but the students had so many social problems, that they didn't have enough support there to really succeed how they could. It was very stressful, and it wasn't safe. There was a lot of gang activity, um, and the principal wasn't a strong leader, and didn't get along with the other three principals, so the teachers were trying to do everything. You know do her, she was great at hiring competent teachers who could do her job, but she didn't lead.

Awad: Man.

Meeker: Yeah, she didn't lead. And um, I had a job... I didn't have my classroom, so I sat in the back with the attendance teachers, and I heard all the stories about, you know why kids weren't coming to school and it's like so freakin' sad. You know, how do we solve these social problems? Um, and when I, when I got the job I have now, I sort of had like survivor's guilt. You know, because my school now is very different. The kids are, a lot of them are low income, and they also have a multitude of social issue, but the want to be in sc- the school offers them so much, that they want to be there. That's like very f- like a family, which is something that my other school didn't cultivate. Yeah, which the kids desperately needed, you know.

Awad: Can you, can you tell me, you know, a story about students you remember in those early years? Or...

Meeker: Hmm. Oh wow. There's one boy, he was so talented, his father died when he was, I think a Sophomore. Um, you know, I often wonder, like 'wow it's been ten years, those kids are like thirty now.' You know they're like so much older, like what are they're... where are they? Um, he lives near me, h- he lived near me, now he may still live near me. So, after he graduated I kept in touch with him for a year or two, but he so wanted to be a physician. I know he was capable of it, but the school, we're in East New York, this is the school where I taught, didn't give him I think enough opportunity or challenge, you know. I'm sure he graduated there, and he did well, but I would love to know like, where he went to college or how what- how he is. Yeah, yeah.

Awad: Can you, can you talk to me a little bit about... so, you were tea- you started teaching when Giuliani was still in office...?

Meeker: Bloomberg.

Awad: Bloomberg started, okay.

Meeker: Yeah, it was 2005.

Awad: So, besides the small schools initiative, what were other changes that Bloomberg brought to New York City schools?

Meeker: Well, Joel Klein was the Chancellor, so they were all into charters, um...

Awad: Who is Joel Klein?

Meeker: He was the school-like Chancellor Farina, he was the Chancellor. Um, he was a business man, you know originally. Um, I remember when I was in graduate school, I was researching all the testing going on, you know, they were really into the testing. Um, in increasing accountability through standardized testing and changing how teachers were evaluated. Um, which has its pros and cons, but it's complicated, but they were way into the testing, and I believe Joel Klein had a relationship with Princeton review, which had the contract to do all the testing [laughs]. Like it was so obvious, like people were making millions of dollars off of all this testing, but the schools aren't really... you know the students I taught at least, weren't um, weren't benefiting from it, you know. Um, I mean it's simple as not having an air conditioner in your classroom. You came to take the Regents Exam and it's 98 degrees out, and kids at, you know this school have air conditioning... you know it's silly to think about, but it's, it effects the quality of life for a student who comes to school, you know. Um, so yeah, they were really into the... giving charters more space, giving fr- you know charters get free rent, um...

Awad: [incoherent]

Meeker: Yeah, well de Blasio [Mayor of New York], see that's the reason why, like even Moscowitz and Success Charter Academy are like, arch nemeses of Bill de Blasio, because he wanted to charge rent. Yeah, they could move into a building... you know under Bloomberg, he sort of, paved a way for them to take over public school space, and give less space to the public school- you know to the school that was there. Like now they're sharing space, you know, yeah. But, I'm the UFT [United Federation of Teachers] chapter leader at my school so, [laughs] um, I'm a big believer in unions, but um, but I do... Like see firsthand... I feel like the support, the collaborations between the UFT and the DOE [Department of Education] is much greater now that de Blasio's the mayor, and that Chancellor Farina, you know... Things aren't perfect, but it's much, a much different attitude, you know.

Awad: In your capacity as a teacher, and someone who has a background working with people in precarious housing, people with HIV and AIDS, what, what kind of um, impact I guess, did you know, being queer I guess or... in the classroom, have on your students? Or... or did it? Or... Can you talk...?

Meeker: You mean when I came out to them?

Awad: Not necessarily, but on your, you know what impact do you think that, that background, and that... who you are had on your [students]?'

Meeker: You know, when I interviewed for the Fellows, I remember they asked me how I would relate to students who were so different from me and I talked about that. Like that, you know,

my um, homeless students or students with HIV positive parents or students who are HIV positive, you know I understand like that constituency and their needs and... Um, I always taught... when I taught health, when I taught HIV and STI prevention, I would tell them stories about, you know, AIDS... [to students] Nobody knew about it when I was in high school and... New York City, it's a law that we teach this to you, you know the mayor wants you to know because it can save your life, and um, we're gonna know how to use a condom and this is why, you know. Um, so I always brought that in, like that sense of um, matter-of-factness, you know, about it, but I think kids... I know teenagers appreciate that. Like most of my students, the one thing they say often is, 'we wish adults would trust us or tell the truth.' Like 'don't make up stories, just tell us the truth.' So I try to be authentic with them, you know.

Awad: Did you ever have students who were queer themselves or trans themselves, and clocked you as someone that's, you know part of their team and...[laughs]

Meeker: Yeah well, when I came out to my students last year, um, like four or five students came out to me. Whom, they may not have come out... some come out to other teachers or students, and some haven't, but um, I think that... I mean I know that did help them. Yeah, and I'm proud of that, yeah.

Awad: So talk to me a little bit about you're, you know your identity as a tr- as a trans man. Can you talk to me a little bit about that?

Meeker: Can you be more specific? [Laughs]

Awad: Well, um... I'm growing up in an era where I'm sort of like, what they call a 'late millennial' [laughs].'

Meeker: Yeah, I'm Generation X.'

Awad: I'm like, borderline Generation X-Late Millennial, and I'm growing up in an era where a lot of the folks that are younger than me, and I see this in a lot youth, a lot of their... their language and how they identify is coming from the Internet, they have exposure to different things, there's a certain confidence that... that they have in how they talk about themselves, and I'm wondering for someone who's a little bit older than a Millennial, uh, how... how did you come to find the language around your identity? And... how did you come to that? I know that's a huge question...

Meeker: Yeah, it's...

Awad: It's kind of an unfair question, I admit...

Meeker: Well, no, but I have to say, like I'm fifty, and I didn't come out until I was forty-nine. Well, it's interesting, like ten years ago or so I went to this therapist, and she was like queer herself, and I identified as queer or bisexual, and I remember, it's so wild, because I just remembered this like a year ago when I started to transition. I went to her like ten years ago, and

I said that I- I said the words, like I think I might be transgender. And she, I remember, I can see her right now, she was sitting across, and she's like 'Mm, no, no. And we never talked about it. So that was back then. To think that like, there was literally no language to talk about it, [incoherent-].

Awad: That you could access, as someone who's...

Meeker: Or my therapist.

Awad: Yeah.

Meeker: Right? Like... yeah, and then we never talked about it. And um, and so, how can I even? I think like a yea- you know, when I started my transition last March, like a year and a half ago, I sought out a trans male therapist, but I consciously don't know why. I mean, I did it, but I wasn't consciously thinking 'Oh, I think I'm trans so I'm going to find a trans male therapist.' I think I just thought.... It's wild, like how the brain works. And I remember the first time I saw him, I said 'Oh, I'm like gender queer.' And I was having like, anxiety and panic attack, for years I had... ever since I was in college, um, and they were getting worse, and um, my partner actually suggested, like 'why don't you see a therapist' like 'go back into therapy?' So I found my therapist, who I still see, who's amazing, and I remember- I think the first day, mm... I came home and I was journaling, because I read back, and it was the first... After the first day I saw him I think I wrote, 'I can't believe... maybe I'm transgender.' Like I said it to myself, but I didn't say it to anybody else for like a, you know, month or two, yeah. Um, so there really literally wasn't the language for it. Like I didn't grow up with the language, but the amazing thing, is like when I came out, and this gives me like incredible hope... Like my niece and nephew are just turning fifteen, they're from Northeast Ohio, they go to public school, um like typical, you like Internet tweens and teens. Um, my nephew is very introverted, very STEM focused, computer [focused]. My niece is like a, went to like a performing arts school. So, I had this plan to come out to them with their mom, and my partner, and we were eating dinner, and I was going to talk to them about... they're twins, so I talked to them about their childhood, and I said 'What did,' you know, 'do you remember your favorite toy?' and we were talking about gender roles and what they had, because they're a boy and a girl, and then I came out to them. I thought my nephew would like run out of the room and never want to see me again. And so I came out to them, and Jordan, the girl, had the biggest smile on her face, and she said 'Um, I'm so happy you'r- you can finally be who you really are,' and I'm like 'Okay.' And then he said, 'So what pronouns do you use?' [Laughs] I was like, 'this is what we're dealing with.' Not at all what I expected. I expected her to be supportive, but confused. And they were like 'We know all about this- the Internet. Kids have websites about this. I'm like 'Oh my God' And I think like, Jazz Jennings, like her little reality show, is like really helpful to kids you know. So, so then, I thought, right, when I tell my students... they're older, that they're from many different cultures and countries, some of which outwardly murder and persecute gay people. So, I'm like, 'I don't know how this is going to happen,' but I really frontloaded it, and prepar- I made like a.. I was... I really prepared before I did it. Um, and it was pretty remarkable. I remember the first day of school, um, I introduced... like Teaching Tolerance has a great poster on gender and it has box for like gender expression, gender identity, sexual

orientation, and biological sex, and it talks about like the difference. And I think I went over that like first or second day when we did, because I did pronouns. I was they and them last year, in September, and it like was confusing to the kids, but um, we were talking about that. And one of my students she's a senior now, she raised her hand and she said... I think I said something like, 'Does anyone, has anyone ever heard of this?' and she said, 'Oh, I had a gender queer mentor this summer!' And I was like, 'Alright, this is what I'm dealing with.' I was like, 'Oooh, breathe a sigh of relief.' [laughs] Like it's been introduced by them. So, it's still a process. You know it's like, I have to, I still am thinking this year now, how I'm going to, if I'm going to disclose it and how I'm going to disclose it. Like every group of students is different, but the language is definitely there. So, that's a, that's great, yeah.

Awad: I'm wondering, too, as you're talking about this. As someone who kind of came of age when the Christian right was first getting its feet, it's feet wet [laughs]. Um, and now the moment that we're in, we do have this language, but there's also this tremendous, uh, pushback and violence. And on Friday, uh, Attorney General Jeff Sessions just passed a broad, um, I don't even know what the proper language is, but basically broad, uh broad guidelines around...

Meeker: Reversing guidelines.

Awad: Reversing the guidance on, um, you know, protecting religious freedom so you don't have to employ people who have had abortions, have had premarital sex, are LGBT, whatever, whatever. And I'm wondering what, you know, what are, what are some of your thoughts as someone who kind of came of age when that stuff was just beginning. How do you make sense of this moment that we're in?

Meeker: Um, you know it's really interesting. Like last year, you know like the Gavin Grimm Supreme Court case, that's... got changed right after they reversed guidance on the bathroom. Um, the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], got... did an amicus brief of trans educators that I participated in. And I remember during that time, I thought... I remember when he [President Trump] got elected. A friend of mine who's like a white, cis man, very progressive, but coming from that perspective said 'Oh, nothing will change.' And Sheila and I both looked at him and said, 'We're freakin' scared.' Um, and not be like overly dramatic, but you know, a gay friend of mine said, he's like, 'This is like Berlin in the 1930's.' You know, like yes, the Congress needs to... I believe guide, they can reverse guidance, but then there would be a court ca- there already are, you know, there's already lawsuits, but just the fact that he's [President Trump] using... you know, it's obvious what he's doing, it's like he's using the most vulnerable groups to appease the right wing. Um, but I keep thinking to myself... Like I've never, I never felt like scared... and I don't, I mean I don't feel, literally like frightened to go out of my house. Like I, it's, it's ironic because it's like as... like my mother is scared for me. Like she said, you know when Trump was elected, she's worried about me. You know and I drive to Route 80 to Ohio in the middle of the night and I go to a rest stop, you know and I am scared of violence, but I've never been... but on the other hand, I was subject to much more fear living as like a masculine woman, than I am as a feminine man. Like it almost changed overnight. And that makes me realize, like, I hate to overuse, but like the privilege I have. I mean it's like, talk about a mind...fuck [laughs]. You know, to like suddenly

get off the subway and realize like, 'No one's looking at me.' It's three o'clock- you know, I don't feel any da- any danger. Whereas a week ago, or a month ago, or two months ago, I felt so different. Because I am perceived differently now. Or just to be given more space, or more, like respect on everyday... like walking down the street I guess is where I feel it the most. It's sickening, um, that that's you know...the world we live in. But no, I don't know, I, I am... Like I go into my classroom and I s- or I talk to my niece and nephew, or I see all this great stuff happening and I'm like the world is almost beyond gender. It will be beyond gender one day, I am like convinced, but then you have this. But I remember, I don't know who said it, not Audra Lorde, somebody was talking about you know, when a movement, the more powerful they get... I remember Larry Kramer in ACT UP, he's in I think Sarah Schulman's documentary [*United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*], or another documentary saying 'They're scared of us. That's what we want.' You know, like when you become more visible, and there's a backlash against you, your group is more powerful. That's why they're backlashing. So, it's like, a paradox, you know. But no, it's really scary, especially, you know like, I go to school every day and my students... I keep thinking, like if I think I'm scared, being like a Muslim girl you know, in a gas station in the middle of the country, how scared she must feel. Um, I just sort of try to think about how to make a difference like in the classroom. That's why I think coming out to students... talking about how diversity is such strength. You know my students can't, a lot of them, not all of them will become citizens, but a lot of them like can't wait to become citizens so they can vote. So that's a good sign, you know... yeah.

Awad: Is there anything that you want to add to our conversation?

Meeker: Um...

Awad: That you're dying to share, that I missed?

Meeker: I guess just um, I guess the biggest lesson that I'm learning... It's interesting when people say like you'r- sometimes people say, 'you're brave.' And I'm like, 'I hate that.' Because I'm like, not that it's really condescending, but it's like, 'Well, no, I just am [male].' You know like I, it's not like I can't be who I am. Um, but I think overall the main thing I'm learning is that adults have many more hang-ups than [laughs] young people do, and I'm just looking forward to the next generation shifting so much. It's already happening, but um, it constantly amazes me like how uncomfortable adults are with gender. In all, you know, all different ways, and young people are much more insightful and open about it. Which is hopeful, you know, yeah.

Awad: Do you have any questions for me? Or any other...?

Meeker: Um, I don't think so. I guess I'm curious about... you know, you know one thing that's hard is that most of the trans men I've met... Like I didn't know any trans men until I started to transition, but still most of them I know are like younger than me, and I am constantly looking for like... you know it's interesting, it'll be interesting to listen to stories like it's so powerful, and when I hear or I read narratives of men who are already in a relationship when they've started to transition. Because that's I think one of the hardest things, you know. Like it gets different

when you're transitioning, and then you start dating and you know, yeah. So, it'll be interesting to see who else you've talked to.

Awad: Well, I'm excited to share that with you. Um, thanks so much for sharing so much of your life, and you know, a lot of history of New York um, in this oral history. Thank you.

Meeker: Thank you.