

**NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**NALA SIMONE**

**Interviewer:** Yana Calou

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**Transcribed by** Colette Arrand

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Yana Calou: Right. Hello, my name is Yana Calou, and I will be having a conversation with Nala Simone for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is June 9, 2017, and this is being recorded at CLAGS, Center for LGBT Studies, at the CUNY Graduate Center, in New York City. Thanks so much, Nala.

Nala Simone: Thank you for having me. [Laughter].

Calou: So if we could just start a little bit, um, tell me where you were born, and when you were born.

Simone: So, uh, born November 1, 1990, and as everyone knows, that's like, All Saints Day, the day after Halloween, so I guess I will say I'm blessed with one of the best birthdays. [Laughter]. Born in Kings County of New York, um, B.K. [Laughter]. Shoutout to B.K. [Laughter]. And, um, my family is from the Caribbean, so I always like to uplift, although I was born in Brooklyn, my values and my core is Caribbean descent, so I'm first-generation American. So I always like to uplift that because that means a lot, you know, to be first generation American from my family, you know?

Calou: Mmhmm. Um, and uh, what are your gender pronouns?

Simone: She, her, and sometimes they.

Calou: Um, and how would you describe your gender to me?

Simone: Oh, how would I describe my gender. My gender—I always like to refer to myself as a woman of trans experience. Um, owning my womanhood and owning the experience and the journey, you know, of what it means to be trans. You know, often time's it's a conversation about what womanhood is, um, so in mine it's about transitioning, right? And accepting who I am as a woman, and how I want to be in the world and contribute, you know? Mmhmm.

Calou: Um, so do you still live in Brooklyn now?

Simone: Ah, yes. I'm a born and raised Brooklyn girl. I don't know, there's something about B.K., you know, you just don't—yeah. I've thought about living other places, but B.K. is my thing.

Calou: Yeah. And what neighborhood do you live in?

Simone: Um, Bushwick. Bushwick, Bushwick, Bushwick. [Laughter].

Calou: How is that? How has that changed over the years?

Simone: Oh, many different ways. Oh, thanks for asking that, that's a great question. It's changed a lot. Um, it's changed a lot to the point that even though I say I still I live in Bushwick, I had to move out, I'm not going to lie to you. I'm just not going to mean it. I don't want no one finding me, [Laughter]. I like to joke, so—

Calou: What is your address? [Laughter].

Simone: What is your address? Do I even know—

Calou: And the apartment number?

Simone: [Laughter]. No, but um, so I name Bushwick because I remember Bushwick just being Bushwick to the point where I remember like, there was a thing for folks who live in Bushwick and know Bushwick there's called a dark side and a light side, so I used to live on the dark side. And here's the thing, back when I was younger like, what the heck does dark side/light side—does dark side mean that? Because I used to go home I used to be scared. It just basically meant that my side got darker quicker than the light side, [Laughter].

Calou: So it wasn't about a racial divide?

Simone: It wasn't about—that's what I thought. Please, no. Bushwick growing up I remember primarily around, like, because my family was from the Caribbean, so on my block it was mixed with practicing Islamics, um, it was very—yeah, it was very cultural, [inaudible] from down south, and folks who identify as Latinx or Hispanic, yeah, so I always look for in the summers, especially when they get the Cuban dummies going—my neighbors are from Mexico, so you know, often times they would invite us over when there was a party and I would just learn about their history and how it correlates to the Caribbean history. So it's really good, I really love that.

Calou: What—do you miss anything about the way it used to be, about like, your neighbors growing up? Or is there anything you really like about it now?

Simone: I must uplift gentrification. Not as an uplifting thing, but more as a—it's a concern. Because it has shifted. What I will say, what it has brought is access to resources and safety and building new establishment, but what I notice is pushing out of blacks and browns, and that concerns me very much. Um, because when you push folks out, where are you going to put them, right? So you know, now you have rent that's like 1,000. But what I do miss about growing up in Bushwick, I think it's just the innocence of playing as a kid, where you know, the question about gender and stuff is not a thing, it's just like let's play hide and go seek and tag, like, [Laughter], like that's all you worry about as a kid, you know? That's what I will say I miss about Bushwick. I also, as growing up and starting to, you know, unpeel the mask of what society wanted me to be, I loved seeing, um, you know, folks will ca the L Line the hipster line, you know? Because you'll see all this variety of culture, styles, dressing, artsy-fartsy kind of way of being, and I love that. It was inspirational for me. It was, um, motivational also, like, to like step into my truth, you know? So I do miss that about Bushwick was like, owning myself. Like, I remember walking through like,

because to get to the L Train, if anyone knows Wilson Avenue, there is a part where it gets sketchy, folks call it sketchy. But I'm from the hood, so I'm like, it's not sketchy, that's just people, right? But people are like, oh my God you know there's a part before you get to the train station and I'm like that's the—what do you mean? But um, I do remember that part as one of my fears was like, I have to walk through these group of people who I didn't know why I was so scared of them, but they were just people experiencing the world and experiencing me as I was experiencing them in my uniqueness and my difference, right? And you know, culturally we've been conditioned to view things that are other, from the norm, a certain way. So I would always grapple with like, how do I navigate to be safe? Um, and understand that my safety is tied to someone's lack of nuance, right? Uh, and their lack of understanding, their lack of fear, their lack of experience, right? So it was tied to a lot of that. So I don't miss the fear feeling part, but what I do miss is the culture of it. I remember the lcees, I remember the trees, I remember the church that I used to go to over there. The school, my teachers, and actually teachers that I still am connected to now in my newness and my meness, [Laughter], you know? Teachers who like, affirmed me and uplift me, and even if they didn't know they tried to step in as much as they want, because you know, growing up in a school predominantly of color, we also didn't have resources and texts and language, you know? Those were pieces that were still lacking, I would say. Um, for example like, in school you didn't talk about gender, you know? They already assumed by the way your mom put on a certain color on your bag that that's what you've been, you know, that's what you would be identified as. You know, like he and, you've got to wear this, boys do this, dadadada, and I was like, no, that's not how I feel. So as a person experiencing life and already having this effeminate way of being, and being in a hyper masculine environment, you know, and noticing it at such a young age, automatically folks would just identify me, you know? Like, I remember going through like, uh, a school, and they would just—I didn't even know at a young age what gay was. I was like, I remember being in, I think it was second grade or third grade—yeah—and I was doing a test and this guy was like, you know you're gay, right? You're a faggot. Like, literally just saying that, excuse the trigger warning. I'm sorry, I should have gave that. But remember saying that, and I didn't even know what that was because here I'm like, my mom is like Caribbean like, what is that, you know? She didn't teach me that at home. So I'm like, it was like, do you know what that is? I'm like yeah, it means, I guess, gay means when you like another gender or sex, because that's all I could connect to. But the F word, you know, I was like, what is that? So at a young age, I felt like society had identified me. And I experienced that through Bushwick, right? Because that's where I grew up in. So Bushwick has allowed me to get a tough skin. It allowed me to love myself deeper, love myself in a way that I get to have understanding or voice or reasoning, and not tolerate bullshit, [Laughter], yeah. So those things are nice.

Calou: Yeah, um, thanks for sharing that.

Simone: Yeah.

Calou: That view of not only how your neighborhood used to be but also the way that—how gentrification has also affected you in ways that have been, like, both positive and negative I suppose.

Simone: Yeah. Positive and negative, yeah. Especially yeah, definitely, I resonate with it. I always say that if there was a way for us to like, connect with—in thinking of Bushwick, a way for us to—Brooklyn and Bushwick needed to be up-built and have resources, but you know, I think about if folks aren't, you know, not maintaining or working, there's taxes that doesn't go into that, right? So gentrification has allowed, I guess, that area to get taxes, but also the government wasn't supporting people of color, you know? So um, yeah, I always say like, there has to be a better way for us to create a system for black and brown folks who are actually thriving and working who still cannot maintain. I mean, it's a common thing. The hustle is just happening, not even just with just blacks and brown, but like, across the board and like, folks who are especially in the LGBT or queer I mean are scraping crumbs, like, literally to maintain. But we still find ways to endure life. Like, I see like queer folk finding parties that are free and like, connecting, and I love that, that we get to connect [inaudible] vent about things that are going on. But the reality is that we're surviving. Like, for real, for real. So I can't imagine what it looks like now as a black woman of trans experience and Caribbean descent thriving, right? Now in my nowness, and having someone who doesn't have that experience, who like, not being able to work and you know, like, as we know like, the population now, when we think about trans is like, poverty rate is high. And President 45, I will not say that president's name on my tape, in my history, uh, [Laughter], you know, who is creating these spaces to oppress folks already, and they will often say that the most marginalized folks get crushed the most. So on that I always think about Islamic, I always think about indigenous, and I always think about LGBT folks, and specifically trans folks of color. Um, yeah. So those are my concerns of that. I know I just went on a tangent. Sorry, let's go back. [Laughter], oh my God, to what you're talking about.

Calou: Yeah, I mean, it's like the experience of talking about what one's whole life is like.

Simone: Yeah, I was like, oh, you want to talk about my life? I can go on and on.

Calou: Um, I'm wondering if you can tell me, um, what your parents were like growing up?

Simone: Oh, my parents, hm, growing up. So, phew, I'm trying to flash back, hm. My mom comes to mind. I'm going to start with my mom first. My mom is loving, sweet, ah, my mom is like a rose, like, growing up, as I was younger. She had such a nurturing way of being, but she also knew how to be discipline, and if anyone knows about Caribbean folks, when they say do this, they mean do this and nothing else. So growing up, one of the things I noticed about my mom is that she was a single parent and she was working at the time [inaudible] older brother, and taking care of my older brother and stuff, so she just made it happen. And apparently I didn't even connect that my mom wasn't working, like, was trying to make ends meet, like she had to babysit, but she was trying to make it work by also staying home and making sure like, listen, the place is clean, if I came home, she was always there to help me with homework. She tried to make it work because she understood that education was important. So at a young age I understand that education was my foundation. She wanted me to understand, you know, history, she wanted me to be able to write legibly. Like, she understood that. So she didn't cut me any slack, so she was like—like, one of the things about me is I used to talk a lot in class a lot. Child, what? A

conversation when I felt like I was a news anchor when I was younger, but I would always get in trouble because of that. Just like, you know, your child does so great in school, but what a way your child can talk. Like, your child can talk, talk, talk, I have to put your child in the corner because he talks so much. I'm like, there was so much to talk about I didn't see my friend in so long, what do you mean? [Laughter]. But my mom, yeah, when I think about my mom I think about like her food, oh, Jamaican food is so amazing, and my mom doesn't have any gallbladder, so one of the things that she did was try to take the traditional ways of cooking from the Caribbean and make it like, holistic and healthier. Like, not that Jamaican food is not healthy, but what she did was like, take out some of the flour and put gluten free stuff. So it would be able to process, add a little bit of rosemary with some Jamaican spices and then just created a whole new thing, my very favorite thing with my mom. Oh, there's so many. Macaroni and cheese, uh, black cake, or actually wedding cake or fruit cake, and last but not least, I love pumpkin pie from my mom. And some fried chicken, child please. [Laughter].

Calou: Did she teach you how to cook at all?

Simone: Uh, she tried. She tried, but I'm just a stubborn person because like, I just felt like, me learning how to cook, I don't know why I associated my mom cooking as something she was doing to do for a man. I don't know why, but at a young age I was like, I don't want to—because I connected with my femininity, keep in mind. I was like no, I'm not trying to cook for no man, nope, I'm not trying to learn, I'm not trying to learn. And like, [Laughter] still now, I still don't want to learn how to cook because I thought it was to learn how to cater to someone else. But the reality is to cater to yourself and survive. So now I'm like mom, can you try to show—and she's like, no, I tried to show you already. She's like, I'm done! I'm done with you. I'm like, oh Lord. And then, I will say this, I'm being full, transparent, and honest in terms of my mom and our relationship. You know, we've had ups and downs. You know, I always want to talk about the good and talk about the bad because it's important in understanding as people where we are. You know, there are times where it wasn't good because I was going through this change of finding out who I was, so you know, my views were different and my behavior shifted because I wanted to find a space where I could be. And for me, home wasn't it, school wasn't it, so what I started doing is I started hanging out with this girl who was like, bisexual is what she called herself. I remember in junior high school, I won't name her name for the sake of privacy, but I started chilling with her, and her mom was just so dope and cool and like, like, aloof, like nonchalant is what she used to call it. Nonchalant. She's nonchalant about life. So I used to go spend time at her house. Mind you, me not being responsible, wouldn't call my mom, because like what responsibility? Who knew about responsibility at my age, right? I went and called my mom and my mom would call me like, or try to reach me and figure out where I am, and then I would call her when I already spent the night over like hey mom, by the way, I spent some time with so and so and so.

Calou: Ask for forgiveness instead of permission. [Laughter].

Simone: Yes! So she used to say, if you don't bring your ass home, I'm [inaudible] before I beat you. When I still got home, she beat me, so [Laughter]. No changing that, but um, in spending

time with my friend during that time in the 2000s and, oh my god, well, you already know my age. Um, I think I was like 13 or, yeah, 13—around that time. 13 is when I felt like I was stepping into what I like. I always knew I was attracted to guys, but um, like, figuring out like, how do I approach actually getting to know a guy and stuff like that. But it was through her, because she was so open and free about who she was, um, I spent time just conversing with her and sharing space with her. Although now when I look back I'm like, some of the times it was like, not a healthy relationship. You know, you don't learn this stuff until you get older, but what I did remember was being in a space, her mom would cook for me and we would talk with her mom because I was like, I want to be able to have that same relationship with my mom about how I was identifying and being told I was at the time. Yeah, sometimes I would come home at 2:00am in the morning and my mom would be like, you know, you're stressing me out. One time they locked the door and they stole my keys and I couldn't find my keys. I'm like, why can't I find my keys? But I was certain that I was going to go out that night because at the time I had learned what West 4<sup>th</sup> was. At—once 13, I was like, I know what West 4<sup>th</sup> is. Christopher Street, oh my God. I remember leaving the house, 9:00, and not coming home the next day because I was at West 4<sup>th</sup> trying to just experience life. And learning about what vogue was very quickly and all that stuff I was amazing. It was just like, wow, where was this place this whole time? And quickly I know like, what's pretty, what's in the cookie jar is not always so gold, right, as they say. Uh, yeah. Wow. These are good questions. [Laughter]. Uh, but yeah, Sabrina—oh—yeah, so my friend at the time definitely allowed me to just be. When I got my home my mom was like, very stressed. I didn't realize how [inaudible] as a parent, um, it was, you know? Uh, so, at the time she called my dad, and this is how I'm going to transition into talking about my dad. She called my dad, who hadn't been in my life for a very long time. I'm thinking [clicks tongue three times]. So when I was younger, he used to be around but then there was a situation happened that, um, my dad kind of put his hands on me, um, physically, that stirred me like, that I didn't feel safe around my dad anymore. So I told my mom, I was like, I don't want to go back, you know? Because I remember when I was younger—

Calou: And they were split up at that point?

Simone: Yeah, they were—by the time I was born, they were split up. You know, my dad had another child that my mom didn't know about until I was five years old, so, she was like oh my God how could you, that kind of thing. So when I would spend time with my dad in Jersey, because that's what I also call my growing up grounds, um, you know, I would meet, spend time with my brother at the time, um, which was great. Uh, and there was an incident that happened, right? That, you know, it can seem like, from my now knowing, abuse, but Caribbean fathers are [inaudible] they would consider as discipline. I was disciplining you, you know, that kind of thing. But it wasn't, you know? There's a line that you don't cross. So for me, I didn't feel safe. And you know, coming back home after the incident, my mom would, you know, in her—just trying to get everything done—didn't notice, and the next day, she was like what happened to your face? [Laughter]. And she's like, oh my God. And you know, calling my father and she was like, you can't put your hands on your child like this, and after that I remember being seven and then I remember from my middle school graduation I think, was it 13? As I graduated, going into high school or before that, I remember he came to one graduation and then after that I didn't see him, didn't talk to him until when I was like, staying out late, high school, and that's because my

mom called. She was like, your son, at the time, is um, giving me problems. And he got on the phone and he was like, you know, you're giving your mom blasted problems. I'm going to come up there and F you up and all of that stuff if you don't start behaving. Keep in mind, I'm getting straight As, Bs, like, my grades were not a problem, it was more so like, I guess the discipline stuff.

Calou: Like staying out.

Simone: Right, the staying out, trying to, on the piers, you know, taking in the water. I'm a water sign, you know, so I love water. Uh-huh. So taking in the water, [inaudible] with folks, you know, trying to figure out who I was. But I didn't know how to communicate that, because again, there weren't any language in school to like, talk about who I was. Uh, so you know, my dad said a curse, and I was like, don't curse on me. I was like, and I just got off the phone. I was like no, I'm not tolerating this, you wasn't even in my life. I remember staying up waiting for my dad, you know, to pick me up because he said he would. And your word is your bond, and he just wouldn't come through, wouldn't even call and say hey, I couldn't make it, none of that. Yeah, so. Um, my experience and my remembering is that, when my dad was around, I do remember joy. I do remember certain pieces that were joy and laughter, but I do also connect with the void. I connect with not knowing, how is a man that's supposed to love me just as a person now, right? For folks who identify as male, you know. And like, I see how that rotation shows up in my dating life, you know? Like, you know, because I don't know. You know like how they say when you have both parents in your life you kind of figure out, you know, what you're attracted to and how you should be treated and stuff like that, so you know, in dating, you know, I've had to learn what I don't like and do like in a very not so joyous way, so to speak. I would say that. If, you know, promiscuous [inaudible] for me at a very young age because I think I was trying to figure out how to be loved from a man, and it didn't come the right way so to speak. [Laughter]. So yeah.

Calou: Our life's work.

Simone: Uh-huh.

Calou: How to be loved and how to love other people.

Simone: Exactly. So like, when I do find a guy who is willing, ready, and open to lean into loving me, I'm just so scared because what I connect to is a void, retreating. So I'm always fearful of a guy doing that. I'm always fearful of being vulnerable with a guy because I'm just like, are you actually ready, although you say you're ready. Or are you seeing me as this fantasy or this fetishization kind of moment for you, and that's not what I want. I don't want that. I want to really connect, you know, I want to be in a loving, joyous, spontaneous, crazy, fun relationship, you know? And like, I connect to like, even like struggling with my brother and struggling with my uncles, like, I see it in ways they show up for my girl cousins, right? That like, I know comparison leads to failure, but sometimes I'm like, why didn't I get that piece, you know? Uh, so, I always have to process and re-do self care and say you know what, it is what it is and you know, really connect to the people who are around me showing me love right now. So that's a piece. But yeah, my dad, you know, mom being Jamaican, dad being Trinidadian, you know, I've experienced, you

know, what avoidance looks like from a male, and what love looks like from a woman, you know? And a mother and nurturer. I will say this though, when transitioning, there definitely was a shift. Um, you know, I came out twice, I like to say. 17, I remember watching, um, one of my high school and, at the time she considered herself bisexual, and I'm going to remind myself not to say names. Um. She was a pageant, beautiful girl—

Calou: Is this the same friend we were talking about?

Simone: No, this is—so the first friend I was talking about was middle school, 13.

Calou: Oh, got you.

Simone: And then I went to high school and I only got worse into [inaudible]—I was like, oh, at 13 I know where the Village is and now, like literally I found out the Village, 13, July, I know the dates. I was 13 years old and it was the week of—before I started school, the week before labor day, and someone drove me to the Village, and I was like, where is this place? Wait, there are people like me? What is this? Uh, then I got lost in December, when I started 9<sup>th</sup> grade, trying to find it myself because at the time me and my mom wasn't connecting because that's when I wanted to just stay out and just be, because I was like, trying to find. So I took the L Train to 14<sup>th</sup> Street and got lost and couldn't find the Village, and somebody even guided me and we didn't find it, me and my other friend. But, I digress. I was talking about 17 years old—

Calou: And a friend—

Simone: Yeah, a friend from high school, she just knew. The first day, she just knew. She just looked at me and was like, mmhmm. I was like, what is that supposed to mean? And it was like, you're gay. I'm like, no I'm not! [Laughter]. Just like saying that, no I'm not gay! And the reality was I was gay, because I was like—I just was experiencing it like, from a gender. Like, my [inaudible] to how I felt wasn't connecting, so like, everyone was telling me who I liked, and everyone was like, you're a guy, you wear this. And once, I kid you not, my senior year of high school, it was like, a 360. It was like, tighter jeans, beating the face, it just like, happened. It was like, we told you you were gay. I'm like, no I'm not. [Laughter]. That's not it. That's not it. But then I'm like, I guess I'm gay. Because if everyone is saying it, then I guess I'm gay. Um, but I remember looking at her photos and then watching videos on YouTube, because YouTube was like, a thing at the time, like 2007, 2008. And I'm watching videos of ballroom scene scenarios, and female impersonation, drag queens, performance. And I'm just like, my mom is in the kitchen mind you. She's cooking. Cleaning meat and cooking with a knife. So if anyone knows a Caribbean person you don't tell them anything [inaudible] while they've got something in their hands, you know? It might just start flying around, [Laughter], so, I was like, alright, I'm going to do it now. I'm going to tell her. So I was like, so mom, I've got something to tell you. And at the time, my cousin was at the house, and she was like, what? So I kind of had told my cousin, she was younger, she's like my baby sis, but I just love her. Like, I don't know, something about her was just, I just trusted her like, you know, she was like a sister to me that I always wanted. I pulled in my room and I said I've got to tell you something. So I don't know how to tell you this, but um, you know

how you've always asked me if I got a girlfriend and stuff like that, and yes I had a girlfriend, but the reason why things didn't work out is before of, I'm gay. She said really? I was like yeah. I was like, you're quiet. So how do you feel? She goes, well you know, you've only got one life to live, you know? She just said it like that. She was like, you know, I would prefer you to be straight, but it's not about what I want. You know, it's about who you are and what you want to be. So, if being gay is what you want, just be safe. That's what she said, be safe. Um, I was like, okay, that's it? I was feeling weird. I was like, why is this so easy? Why is that? What? What? You're not going to kick me out of the house? I was like, please don't be mad, I'm like, trying to figure out. And it felt good, because after awhile she was like, so that's what you've been holding from me for so long? I knew that there was something, and I'm pretty sure she went into her room and cried that night. I'm pretty sure. Yeah. So that was my 17 year old about to graduate high school. Felt so good. And also I was able to tell my mom, because like, because my brother he was singing these homophobic Jamaican songs, I'm like please, this is why I do not like him singing it, because it affects me. And then she got it and she would ask my brother. But it felt like my brother already knew, and he would still do it anyway. Neither here or there. Um, then I went to college. So now we're stepping into another journey.

Calou: Or do you mind talking about—well since your brother is coming up a little bit, since we've talked about, about your mom and a little bit about your father, um, and so you have an older brother, and then—was this also the sibling that you didn't know you had until you were five? So there's also another kind of—

Simone: So my mom's side, it's two of us, and then on my dad's side, I'm pretty sure there's more, but I'm going to give the number that I know is two. Um, and you know, we were born around the same year, but just different times. So my brother was September and I November, but on my mom's side I remember—

Calou: So you're about the same age, yeah.

Simone: Mhmm. So on my mom's side, my brother was seven years older than me. So he experienced life differently, his level of connection was different, and me, I'm just trying to figure it out. I will say this, my mom always tells me, and she always reminds me, you know, one thing about your brother is that when I was—when she had gotten sick, like emotionally just sick and drained and other mental and other stuff that was showing up in her life, my brother stepped in and would take care of me. Um, epilepsy is something that my mom also deals with, so like, my brother like, would—he changed my diaper at a young age and had to see my mom go through this, so she'd always remind me of, you know, that my brother has been through a lot and to like, kind of like, just kind of understand where he's coming from. So I tried my best, trying to give space, but I also like, understood like, respect was important for me as a being, you know? It wasn't just to take any old kind of behavior. So I just—again, like, same [inaudible] my dad I didn't feel safe, I didn't feel wanted or loved around him, so I just kind of distanced myself. I didn't connect to that male aspect, because they wanted me to be a man kind of thing, and I was like, that's not what—that's not how I feel, that's not how I want to connect to, like, it's just not flowing in me. Like, give me a Barbie doll, give me a Ken doll, and I'll be fine, [Laughter]. Just, you

know, give me some makeup that I can do someone's makeup right here, like, yeah. That's why I kept—but, [sighs], my brother and I's relationship, I call it a rollercoaster of folks on different wavelengths and experiencing life differently and dealing with childhood trauma and not knowing that we were dealing with childhood trauma, and trying to figure out how to show up as kids who are raised from a single parent who is doing their best, and a single parent who is experiencing mental illness. Like, I don't say my mom is mentally ill, because it's an experience of her, you know? I'm not putting labels, but an experience that she, you know, she's living with, you know? So we were—you know, I noticed that that was something that we were both experiencing, but through different lenses. And because we was experiencing different, we didn't connect as much and at one point we did. And then it just fell off again. Just not out of mal-intent, but just more just, it just fell off, because I'm like, you know what, there are certain things I don't want in my space, and you know, there's certain ways that he views life, and that was it. Yeah, so. Do I yearn for that connection? I yearn for a connection that is loving and transparent and forgiving, but yeah. We'll get there—

Calou: You never got that little sister or older sister?

Simone: I never got that little sister, but you know what's funny is that it shows up in different ways in my community now is like, when my fellow trans sisters say, hey sis, and they're younger than me, you know? Or when I see youth trans baby coming up and I'm like, oh, and they come to me like, what should I do? I'm dating someone, like a big sister. And at the same time, learning from my older sisters, because I always wanted a sister who was present in my life, and now I have that through my trans sisters, and now I'm regaining that through my father's side, because I've reconnected with some folks from my father's side. And my authentic truth, right? Unapologetically, yeah. Yeah. [Laughter].

Calou: Um, what—um, can you tell me, maybe like, um, who is the most important person in your life now? Or people.

Simone: Uh, the most important person in my life, I need to say, is myself. One of the things that I have to struggle with is often pushing forward other folks, or putting, centering my feelings around other folk. How other people feel, how other people think, well if I do this are they going to feel this, and I was like, wait, what about me? You know, it was one point where I'm like, I feel like I wasn't even living for myself, I was living for others. So like, now in this journey, and keep in mind, this trans journey and this truth of mine that I'm living, it's been about six years, seven years, so I'm like, I'm still experiencing me. So the most important person in my life is me, even in my mistakes, even in my values and my growth. Possibility models that I look up to I would say is, you know, Laverne Cox, I love, uh, Janet Mock, I love [inaudible], I love Miss Major, I love Erin Lang, I mean, I can name some rock lords, Ashley Hunter, I mean, I can leave so many powerful folks just doing, just amazing work that affirms me in a way that makes me sometimes like, oh, if I have to take a day off, I know someone else is stepping in. But you know, I don't get a day off in this work, right? [Laughter]. But yeah, one of the most important people—or person, I would say, is myself. Um, yeah.

Calou: Good answer.

Simone: [Laughter].

Calou: Um, you were going to start—when we started talking about your brother you were going to start telling me, and then you moved from high school into college and that there was kind of another coming out.

Simone: Ah! Yeah, the other coming out. The other coming out, so I remember the first day of college, um, this is 2008 in August.

Calou: You have a good memory.

Simone: Uh-huh. Oh, so one of the things my mom always talked about is that, she was like, we've got phonographic memory. So I can close my eyes and remember this whole moment, I can remember what picture, what colors are in the room, I can remember that. So I can like, literally close my eyes and think of the time, it was like, August 2008, it was hot, I went to the sewing lab on the—was it the fourth floor?—in the C building. Ah, yeah, C building, right between the passing of the two buildings. Anyway—

Calou: What school?

Simone: Uh, FIT. Fashion Design Institute, yes, she went to fashion design school, um, and I went there and there was this young lady helping me who was like a student worker you know, because you can get student work aid or something like that to support for school. She was helping me, and I was just like—at the time my best friends came with me. And it was like, why don't you ask if they have kits that they were giving away? And I asked and she was, because at this time I could not afford shit. I just want to be clear. Like, support for college was like, one, I just graduated a high school where everything was kind of free, and I just had to pay for prom and all that stuff. By the way I won prom, you know, crown, just to put it like that. I just got to name that. And at the time it was like, you should win prom queen. And my best friend was like, and would have rocked it any other way. I was like, y'all better go ahead and affirm me. [Laughter]. Um, but um, yeah, I met basically—why I'm telling you this story about this sewing room is because [inaudible] a wonderful, beautiful woman, and I just could not stop staring at her. You know, she was bonding with the woman who was, you know, or the young lady who was helping me get the kit. And she turned around and she was like girl, why do you keep staring at me? Like real country, like girl, why is you in my face? I'm like, I'm sorry, you're just so pretty. She was like oh, am I? And I was like yeah. And she was like, six foot something. She's gorgeous. I mean, body like everything. Um, and then one day she was like, she was trans. I was like, wait what? Wait, really? And then in that moment it was like, woah, it is possible. It was like, ah-hah, because from my view, all I knew of trans women was—

Calou: Was she another student?

Simone: Yes. She was like a couple of semesters ahead, like close to graduating. But in my knowing, all I knew of trans women was Jerry Springer. I was like, that's not what I want to be. So like, my mom was like, do you want to be a girl? I'm like nope, definitely not want to be no Jerry Springer, because that's all I could think of. My mom asked me when I said I was gay. She was like, do you want to be a girl? Like, she asked that, but I was like no, because what I thought at the time was Jerry Springer, like, you know, how they portrayed women it's like no, I want to be educated, I want to be an educated person, like, I was connecting things to like, the wrongness. Like, they were just—well, it was complicated. It was like, I don't know -it's weird that I reflect now that when my mom asked me if I wanted to be a girl I said no, and all I thought was Jerry Springer, right? Because that's all, like, that's all I knew of a trans woman was to be on Jerry Springer saying that, you know, she had sex with somebody else's partner, and I was like, that's now how I want to portray this. I was like no, that's not what I want. Um, but anyway, beautiful being. She would teach me how to—so I would spend most of my time with her, she was from Alabama. I spent most of time with her in class and she would really help me because I was struggling because fashion design, although I wanted to be a designer I was clear that I did not know how to sew or sketch. I don't know how I got into school but I did. I sent a portfolio that I felt was great until I met, like, all the other fucking students and I'm like, goddamn. I need some catching up to do. Um, and she helped. She really did. And we would spend time, and at the time, you know, I used to dance, you know, through my years of high school and was in a West African dance company, um, and I loved marching band, because my high school had a marching band. So she was from Alabama, and she knew about majorettes, and [inaudible] and stuff, so at 2:00am in the morning when we're still at the school and we wanted a break, we would just do a count, like, in the hallway. [Laughter]. And she would—and like the lead majorette because we had that connection, you know? I remember most of my uh, associate year of FIT, sleeping in the D lounge, fourth lounge, and any FIT student knows this lounge because fashion design students do not sleep. Uh, so folks who know, but there are other students who does, but folks who know, like, that lounge, you would mostly find primarily folks of color like, who didn't dorm, in that lounge, trying to get their work done. And I'm telling you, we would eat, sleep, finish our work, wake up, go get breakfast. Like, we had a routine. Go to class, and then be right back in that lounge. I literally had my clothes for the week packed in my locker with my school supplies and everything because it was a deep, big locker and I would shower in the locker room and then come up and like start the day. Like, that's how it was. But I also didn't want to be home because like, while my mother was, you know, experiencing you know, mental health, you know, I felt like the house wasn't inviting for me. You know? And also like, coming out was a thing, you know, so I was like, let me just stay home, like, at not home, but at school, and just connect with folks, because again, that's what I was trying to connect with was with people that were like-minded and like me. And then, after graduating, because again, I started like, I started going through an androgynous stage I guess you could say, like effeminate clothing, makeup, but yet, shoulderpads. Like, it was just changing. Just think of the 80s, I guess. Grace Jones, very that. That's what I was experiencing. And then, I got clarity.

Calou: Yeah, I was going to ask you about clothes, but we can talk about clothes since you—

Simone: Uh, I got clarity around my graduating, I think it was 2010 and I was like, I wonder if this—you know, I think I'm trans, I really do. I want to be a girl, it was like, I don't know, I think I really want to do this. I'm having so many flashbacks, this is great. Because at the time, I remember before starting college I wanted to be in a ballroom house, and this guy that you know, was starting their hou at that time, um, was like, you should vogue femme. I was like, what is that? Vogue femme. You know, vogue femme. Get up and geesh is what they said at the time. I was like, who is a geesh? And it was like, you know, get up and you know, drag. I was like, drag? I was like, let me try it. And child, when they were done with me, I looked like the most beautiful thing that ever walked the planet. Then Halloween came, and I was Jennifer Hudson.

Calou: Yes, [Laughter].

Simone: I was clear, uh-huh, yes I was, um, for Halloween, child, and no one new, they couldn't even tell, they were like, you looked like a woman. And I was like, yeah, no, honestly I feel like a woman. This is what I kept saying in my head, but the reality is like, this is what it is and I can't do anything about it. But meeting, you know, my friend, who was trans in college, was a possibility for me. So when I think of my life I think of her because she was that pivotal moment. Like, she was a core of my journey. You know, when I told her that I wanted to be trans, she was like no, don't do it. And I was like why? She was like, I tell you not to do it because do you see what I go through? And I was so in my excitement of transition, didn't even—

Calou: Hearing it was possible, learning it was possible for the first time.

Simone: Yeah, and not even connecting to the—like, when we were coming in, that she was misgendered like 10 times. Like, right? Not even connecting that like, when she has to go to school and she gets her grades, that they still call her by her birth name. Actually she repeatedly asked for them to change and went to the dean. Not even connecting to that struggle, but connecting to like, wow, there's hope.

Calou: You were actually doing it.

Simone: Yeah! It was like, I was like totally dismissing the red, like, the red flags, but it's like wait, no, she's like, she's like, do you see what I have to go through? Like, this journey is not easy. You're going to lose a lot of people, you know, people will not be by your side, are you sure you want to do it? She was like listen, if you want to do this, do it. But I'm telling you, just stay as a guy, like you're going to be alright, but baby, she said uh-uh, this ain't for you I'm sure. And she found a way, I remember and I saw like the tears in her eyes I guess because we had a connection and she was worried more about me. And then the next time, you know, I tell someone else and they asked me, and it was like well when do you see yourself get old? How do you see yourself dying? As a woman, or as a male? What comes—and I literally closed my eyes, and I could never forget that vision that I had. It was like a flash, and it was like, legit. Like, I can taste, like I can feel the wind, and I pictured a house, I saw like the pavement, like the stairs, right? On the left-hand side I was sitting in the rocking chair with salt and pepper natural hair going down my back, like I'm talking about center part, everything. It was so vivid. And I don't know who it was, but there

was a guy between the screen door just looking and smiling, and out in the fields on the yard were kids. Now one thing that folks who really know me know that I love kids. Like I said I want 50 kids just like Josephine Baker. Hopefully I can't even tell you, that's my goal. But I saw kids playing, I remember having this smile over my face of light. I don't know—like, I still remember that feeling. I remember being in a home and I remember that stuff, and I was like, I see myself as a woman. I remember having a dream in a casket, old, with salt and pepper down my hair, and I remember that the gown that I had on was like, either a soft pastel pink, as you know I love pastel pink, but yeah, I don't know where it came from, but I'd seen it. And then at that moment I connected, it was like alright, what are you going to do to the next step. So keep in mind, everybody kept saying like, I used to [inaudible]

Calou: You were still living at your mom's house.

Simone: Yeah, right, uh-huh.

Calou: [inaudible]

Simone: So you know, one time my mom would say, you know, I haven't seen you in awhile, like I'll come up and bring you some food. And she said, you know, I'll cook your favorite. And I was like what, fried chicken? And she said no, curry chicken. I was like, well, I love that too, so I was like okay. So she was coming, she was like me and grandmother have to go somewhere. So she was with my grandmother. So [inaudible] the person that was my friend at the time was like, I want Jamaican food, I love Jamaican food, she was like, can you bring me some Jamaican food? I was like yeah, I'll ask my mom. So my mom was like yes, I'll bring your friend some. So my mom came down, I remember it was in the E building, she came down with my grandmother, and keep in mind all the security guards were Caribbean. So I was, my friend at the time was having bad experiences with the security guard because that was mostly who would be the folks who would be cisgender. And she would write the dean [inaudible] to teach them, and she would still experience it. And these folks would not budge. I'm like, no you cannot call me that, you know? There were some of them who was really supportive and sweet, so I must say that, but she really went through it. But anyway, my mom brought the food. She was like why are you so pretty, you're tall. She's like, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, you know. We got the food, we went out, and she's like, does your mom know I'm trans? I was like no, I never told her, that's not my story. You know, that's not my thing to tell her. You know, I was like, do you feel comfortable? She's like, it's up to you, girl. I was like, okay. I told my mom and was like you know, hey, you know, by the way, that's my friend Elsie, remember I was telling you, you know, I have a friend who like, we just chill and stuff like that, you know, that we support each other. She was like oh yeah, by the way, she's trans. She's like, trans? I was like, you know those videos that I watched on YouTube of the women like kind of lip synching and stuff that were born, and she was like, oh yes, I got that. I was like, well mom, that's how I feel sometimes. She was like oh, okay. She was like, well that's why you haven't been home and that's why you've been depressed. Like, what the fuck, mom, you know that something is going on and you're not saying anything? You're just letting me figure it out? She was like yeah, it makes sense. She was like, that's why you've been staying out and not coming home. She was like, you know, she was like yeah, I didn't

know how to tell you because one of the things that was important for me was for you and my grandmother and my aunt to know. Because one of the three important people in my life, although I didn't say this awhile ago when you asked, the three people was, you know, my aunt, my mom, and my grandmother. They still are. They're sort of like the foundation, uh, of womanhood that I know. That I look up to and carry their values and their ways of living. Um, and I was like, I really want acceptance for all three of them. And she was like listen, um, if that's who you want to be, you know, you only have one life to live. So you have to live at your best life. And then she said I'm going to support you in telling your grandmother if that's what you would like, and I was like yes please.

Calou: So your grandma was there but you were only telling your mom.

Simone: My grandmother was—so my grandmother and my mom was there to drop off the food.

Calou: Bring you food, yeah.

Simone: Then they got back on the train to head home, so I called her to do it over the phone.

Calou: Oh.

Simone: Oh, no. I'm not doing that in person.

Calou: [Laughter]. Phone is easy, [Laughter].

Simone: Oh no! No way. I waited until she got all the way home because you know, my mom is the type of mom who she wants to be praised about her food. She's like, did [inaudible] eat the food? Did she like it? It taste good? I was like yes, but so my friend got on the phone and she was like, I love the food, the food is so good. Child, we tore that food up because we were hungry. We were also college students and broke. And did not eat. So we needed that food. McDonalds' was not cutting it, [Laughter], so, yeah I told her, and she, you know, she took it well, and then literally that following weekend I went home. And she was like, it totally makes sense. And we sat down, I was like okay. So then I asked my friend at the time, what doctor do you go to? Lo and behold it was Callen-Lorde, [Laughter], Community Health Center, [Laughter], so then I went there and then I started. You know, Callen-Lorde was also the first time I got an HIV rapid test and, you know, uh, that's what I learned about sexual health and, you know, how to remain negative and those kind of things, you know? Um, but in that I was there for something else. I was there now to transition, um, and because at the time I was young.

Calou: Did anyone go with you there for your first time?

Simone: No.

Calou: Or you went by yourself?

Simone: I will say often that I notice in my journeys I've taken a step by myself.

Calou: Mmm.

Simone: Yeah, just to kind of figure out. So I'm always like, okay, what do I got to do for myself? Uh, so I went there by myself, and I went into the HOT program, which means Health Outreach to Teens. And then I met who my best friend is now, I hope she wouldn't mind me saying her name. Um, but oh, I'll try to say, well, my best friend now, um, Ms. Lyons, I just use her last name, Ms. Lyons. Um, and she was my councilor. Um, and I didn't know who she was, I didn't know she was trans or whatever the case may be, but she's my councilor and she was helping me guide me through this, um, to this place, and then I met with my first provider. Now [inaudible] so you know, the girls in the community always know that before you can start hormone therapy, you need to go see a psychiatrist first so they can determine—child, not me. I didn't do that, I went and saw the doctors like listen, I know I'm trans, look at me, I know I'm a woman, like, I'm not doing no—I'm like—

Calou: [Laughter].

Simone: Talk about advocacy and demand. Child, I was like, because I already knew that some of the girls, because one of my good, good girlfriends at the time also who was like, who was like very known in the community doing work, um, Olympia Sutan, you know, we kind of grew up together a little bit. Um, and she was like girl, because she was like, ready, and I was like, I know I'm ready, but I don't know. But we would be fab and we'd do it together.

Calou: [Laughter].

Simone: And she was telling me, she would always be like, you know, I'm going to the LGBT Center, I'm meeting with Christina Herrera. Keep in mind, I didn't know who these people—and now that I know them I'm like oh, how everything comes full circle. So if I gave you—

Calou: Such a little world. [Laughter].

Simone: Yeah! You've got to meet with someone first, and they've got to—they talk to you and you get a referral. I'm like child, mm-mmm. I'm like, this girl is not—so I met with Anthony Verasa, the doctor, and I was like listen, I know and I'm clear that this is who I am, I already knew since I was a young child, I just didn't know the name for it, I know who I am. And the first thing he asked, do you have people who support you? I was like yeah, my mom is very supportive. And I think hearing that piece was what helps to start.

Calou: Did you get a script that day?

Simone: Sure did. I was not leaving without my script. I was like, I just want to make you clear now that I am trans, I know who I am, there is no turning back, this is how I feel. I don't think I

got the script that day, but in my mind just everything seemed rapid. I think it took a week. I had to do bloodwork and stuff. But—

Calou: But you didn't wait six months, you didn't wait—yeah.

Simone: Yeah, yeah. I didn't wait no six months. It was like, [snaps], boom. And then that's when life really hit. Life really took off when I took that first pill. And keep in mind, the interesting about me is at a young age is that I had this—like, this discernment about myself of saying things to the universe and it happening. I remember taking that first medication that I was clear that I wanted to have my surgery. And I remember at the time, in 2011, Janet Mock just came out with the video *It Gets Better*, and it was because of her—because keep in mind, I was thinking about transitioning for awhile. It was like a year. I'm like, I know I want to do this, but then my friend is saying not, who is trans, at the time who is in school and experiencing this, and then boom, it gets better. And I watch a video and she was just talking about you know, it gets better. Like literally like, you can do this. And I remember seeing that, I'm like, I can. And seeing her in love with this wonderful man named Aaron like, I like—[inaudible]

Calou: I think that's the name too.

Simone: Yeah! I remember like, looking at the YouTube of them working [inaudible] and I was like, this is amazing. She's frickin' hot and gorgeous. It's possible. And I remember declaring, when I took the first medication I said by the age 25, I want my surgery. I was like, I'm going to have my surgery.

Calou: So how old were you when you went to Callen-Lorde for the first time?

Simone: I was like—I think the first time I went was like, 19 about to turn 20. 19 about to turn 20. So I was 19, I was like, I want to do it, I want to start. Because you know, my friend at the time also made it clear, was like, if you're going to transition you want to start now because puberty is about to start hitting you. And if you want to like, look cute, like baby put them blockers in your system is what they would say, and start the estrogen journey. I was like alright, okay. I'm like, I can just beat my face all day and I'll be fine. And she was like no. And she was right, so thank God I started, or I did start at 19, I think 19, going to 20. Yeah.

Calou: and were you working at the time, too?

Simone: I think it was 20, I don't know. Maybe I'm mixing it up. At the time I wasn't working. Um.

Calou: You were like, full-time school.

Simone: Oh my God yes, thank you. Yes, I was. So at the time, um, so the window period, or the time period I should say, sorry, um, it was 2010. I applied to work at Banana Republic, the SoHo flagship store, and I got the job because I was getting out of college and I needed to do something for the summer. Um, so 2010, I'm 19—

Calou: And you were like, I work at FIT, I'm into fashion, I'm looking into design stuff.

Simone: And they was like, yeah, and they was like, sealed. Because I remember 2008 I started college, 2009, so that was my sophomore year. So I graduated at 17, started college 17, 18, so I was 19 then. So 19, 2010, you know, 2000—ending. It was like that August, so about to go into 2010. I'd have to look at a calendar, but neither here or there. But I started working with them, everything was good, had hours, and then I had to let them know, you know, school is about to start so I just need to work evening shift. So I started working—

Calou: What was your job there?

Simone: Um, at the time I just started as a sales associate. But then I became an accessory specialist, because I love diamonds and bling and stuff. [inaudible] diamonds, but I love just wearing like, you know, beautiful accessories. And I knew the product well, so I sold one and I sold—and they were like oh, this is where you should be stationed. And I did. And in that time, keep in mind, I was beating my face. I'm talking about like, not beating my face like hitting it, but for folks who don't know the term, but the community know like, child, when I said smoky eye, she had a smoky eye. Like, concealed under my eyes like I was doing it. And I was hired, like, with the concealer under my eyes, natural look, not with the eye shadow, and in a couple of months of transitioning, then that's when the eye shadow and stuff started coming in.

Calou: So did you apply with your birth name, like when you applied for the job?

Simone: Uh-huh, because I wasn't even thinking of—I mean, the thought of transness was there, but it was like oh, I'm just an effeminate guy, and that's fine. That's what was there, more so what I was connecting to. And I started journeying into the fact, like became more feminine. Started like, stepping into what I really felt, because I'm like, as I'm getting older I'm like, I'm—fuck that, I'm trying to please people for what? Why am I trying to please people? Like, and they're not doing it, like—

Calou: They're not trying to please you, [Laughter].

Simone: Yeah, exactly. So I went back to school for my second year, because how they work, you graduate with your associate and then you get to decide if you want to go into your bachelors or not. So I decided to go into the bachelors program, but in the summer I had to figure out what I was going to do. So I started working, um, continued working, I should say, and then started college again for my bachelors program, knitwear was my concentration. Um, and then the hours, I was only working mostly night shift and weekend shift, which was great. Um, and then I started transitioning, and then once I graduated in 2012, so this is probably about a year in my transition, my hours started cutting. Like, I'm talking about—

Calou: And did you have the same manager the whole time, or did that always change?

Simone: It shifted a couple of times.

Calou: Because it's like over like a year.

Simone: Yeah, the turnover was like, crazy there, please. Like, crazy. One thing that didn't change was HR, that I barely saw. Uh, sorry, throwing shade, but yeah, whatever.

Calou: So this is like, tell me the real—

Simone: Yeah, so I was working 2012, and then after that, in 2012, [sigh], I was going into— around 2012 I noticed a shift once I graduated FIT. Because at that time I was like, I need to find a fashion design job. And I was talented—

Calou: and you were keeping that—you kept that job, but your hours were getting cut.

Simone: My hours were getting cut. So my hours got cut back because I requested it. But in the summer I wanted more hours, and they was like no, we don't got hours, we don't got hours, and I was like, why don't you have hours? And they were like, well, we don't just got hours, we're not making our goals. But then like, five new employees were hired. I was like, what the fuck? Um, I was like okay. So I'm like alright, let me try to find another job, didn't happen. So then—

Calou: And is this around the time that—

Simone: I was transitioning.

Calou: Yeah, and this is around the time that you met RAP?

Simone: I met RAP around—which is the Retail Action Program—I met RAP around—end of 2012, 2013. And I remember this is the same year that Islan Nettles passed away. So like, all that I resonated with. But yeah, 2012.

Calou: And how did you learn about the Retail Action Project?

Simone: Well, I learned from a co-worker that was there, that was already going through RAP, and they would have like secretly was like yeah, come to this place, they help you, um, because at the time my hours were cut so severely that I only was making \$72 every two weeks. Like, it was so bad—

Calou: They were just giving you four hour shifts, like—

Simone: Yeah, four hour shifts, basically a Metrocard. And I was like, I told them, you can't keep doing this. And they still did it, and if you didn't show you got written up. I'm like, I don't want that on my record. I was like, I don't want that. They're writing you up. So I met with Sasha from RAP.

Calou: And were they calling you Nala at work, or?

Simone: Oh, child, no. Oh, so the good thing about retail—there is such a high turnover you get new staff. So there were some people who would simply refuse to call me by my name.

Calou: And you asked them and you were like—

Simone: Yeah, nope. But one thing I will say is they was like no, you will. Like there were people in management that were like no, you will not disrespect, you will call this, if you don't, like, I will say there were people in management who did that. But once that management left.

Calou: But then because like, you stuck around, then everybody else like—

Simone: Everyone left and I was still there because at the time it was like, I was in school so every semester I would come after school like, for the summer, ready to work, or after the semester was over, over the break ready to work hours.

Calou: And like, you knew the line, you knew the product, like, you'd been there.

Simone: There was new workers.

Calou: You knew the store.

Simone: So I was happy, because as I transitioned I started blossoming. And boy, when I tell you I was gorgeous, as they would say, when I say I was just gorgeous looking? What? [Clicks tongue]. Looking good. So there was like, sometimes worker guys primarily would try to hit on me, and I'm like no, try to turn them down, and then the old workers was like, just so you know, this person is A, B, and C. Like trying to spill tea as we call it. And I'm like ugh, why would you like—I was turning them down anyway, I wasn't interested. But because of that, it created a hostile environment like, this guy started going around saying you know, Nala's attracted to me, but too bad she's a man kind of bullshit kind of conversation which was so like, no, that wasn't it. So it got out of hand to the point I had to tell a manager. And it seemed like they were just trying to push it under the table like, hush it up.

Calou: They just didn't want to deal with it, didn't know how, didn't want to.

Simone: Right. So it was like we can try to just make sure that y'all don't work together on the same shift. It's like what? What? Okay. But neither here or there, my hours started cut the more like, I was trying to speak up about stuff, about hours, about like, experience of discrimination, in terms of like the misgendering, you know, just folks talking about me like, around my gender, my transness, and like, laughing. It just became like a not so great environment.

Calou: And how about like if when you were hired there, you had really specific rules about like, what clothes that you wear when you're working at a retail store, so you were like—

Simone: Oh my God, yeah. They would even say that. They was like, oh, one time—[Laughter]—one time, a manager, interesting how things come—fall back story because now this person is trying to talk to me. Hilarious, right? Was like, you can't wear this on the floor. I was like, what do you mean? I already told them I was trans, I won't be taking this off. I was very feisty, a Caribbean. I was like, no, I'm not taking this off. Like, this is what—I told them I'm trans, you will call me this. And he—

Calou: And you're wearing like, Banana clothes—

Simone: Banana clothes, styled, decked, I was looking hot in my pumps, okay? They was like—the person was like, oh, let me see about that, let me go back, because I really don't have no problem, I'm not trying to create a problem but let me see. Literally, he was like oh, okay, but—I'm like no. I will be keeping this one. It's not revealing. It's like pants with a button down, a blazer, and heels, and some diamonds on my neck. I call them diamonds but again people, they're not diamonds. It was like, some cheap costume jewelry. [Laughter]. But it looked good! It felt wonderful. I was looking good. I had my little bang in my hair, but yeah. But I noticed—

Calou: So they tried to be like, this is like, you're not dress code and you're like, actually I am, you're just like, saying this stuff.

Simone: Yeah, I'm not in dress code.

Calou: You're pissed that I'm trans.

Simone: Uh-huh. Then it was like, oh, you've got a nose ring. And I'm like, you can't even see my nose ring. So it became that like they were trying to pick things. And it was like, oh that's right, because you didn't help this customer, or Nala let's write you up because you've been late. It was like, all these things, and like, here I am in my transness trying to navigate life and like, trying to come to work and trying to figure out how I'm going to get paid.

Calou: Trying to get paid.

Simone: How to get to work on time, how to get to work safe, you know, because like, at the time when I was transitioning in Bushwick, I'm going to go back to Bushwick—

Calou: Do you like, change close like—

Simone: No, I—what, change clothes? [inaudible] so much work. My mom was Caribbean, she was like, if people don't like it, that's their business. [inaudible] business, she would say. So I was just like alright mom, if my mom was okay like, that gave me the confidence to leave me house. But when I left the house the reality hit it was like, I need to navigate safely. Like I would have a

sock with coins, and if had [inaudible] because I'd have to pull it out to fight. That's how legit safety was for me at the time. I remember in my neighborhood there was a guy who went to jail when I was younger, when he came back, recognized me because I had transitioned. Like, now I'm blossoming, like, everything is looking great, and would follow me to the train station and would like, would call me over, and it was like, one, ask for fellatio, and I'm like no, and like, literally would grab me. And I had to tell my brother at the time, and he was like anything that tries to happen come to me, and I kept telling him like no shit with this guy, because I didn't also want my family to fight. But just think about that going to work. So I had to experience that before I got to work, to be able to shift to then deal with—

Calou: Hi, can I help you with your like—

Simone: Hi, how can I help you with your rich, white, [Laughter]—like, self who is about to buy this bunch of clothes and ask me to get 10 pair of shoes that you might not buy you know? It was just amazing—like, shift everything, then to experience also more transphobia in my job. And how people would question my transition and be like oh, I thought your boobs are growing. Like, it became like I was a spectacle for them. They would [inaudible] oh, your butt is getting big, oh my god it's amazing, give me some of those pills, I need some. Like, especially the girls, the cis girls. Like, you know, your butt's growing. And at that time I'm like—didn't know how to address how uncomfortable I felt with them saying it because I didn't know why it was problematic.

Calou: You were like, you can go get those pills real easy, have fun.

Simone: Yeah, I know, like—but I didn't know how to—I didn't have the language to explain like, how uncomfortable I was about—

Calou: To have them talk about your body.

Simone: Yes. My body was such a vulnerable state, you know, because I wasn't that [inaudible] stuff, when people would say that's a man trying to—you know, just trying to—I became more vulnerable. I became a target, you know? Um, it was one thing of being an effeminate guy, but now like, [inaudible] boozers coming out and walking the street and now I'm over-fetishized because like, folks are looking at me like, oh, I want you to do this, I know who you are kind of—it was just horrible. Horrible. Horrible, horrible, horrible. And then to go to work, to only be in a space that wasn't affirming and stuff like that. And then I remember 2013, um—

Calou: Can you tell me a little bit about when you went and met Sasha and went to RAP for the first time—

Simone: Yeah—

Calou: And any of the like, organizing work or anything that you remember from being empowered to like, change things at work or speak up or anything that you remember from those days.

Simone: Yeah, um, I will say one of the things that I did learn from RAP was like, how to organize, how to become unionized. I think that was one of the things that was great because I didn't even know that existed, I didn't even know that I could speak up, I didn't even know that I could get like, short-term disability, not short-term—um, short-term employment, like, because they were cutting my shifts.

Calou: Oh, short-term unemployment, yeah.

Simone: Yeah, I was like, wait, that's a thing? So imagine me trying to live off of \$72, like to eat. Can you imagine? I remember trying to like, find scraps, scraps just to eat because I was so hungry, but I knew it was important to go to work, you know?

Calou: And did you end up filing for that and getting?

Simone: I actually did end up filing, but the case just took so long because at the time I will say this, I didn't know that I had a story, I didn't know that I was being discriminated—I didn't know what that looked like.

Calou: You were like this is just how the world is, it's just hard, like.

Simone: People—yes! I thought that's just how the freaking world was, and lo and behold that there were kind of laws to help support that. But people around my job just kept it quiet. They weren't trying to tell me anything, you know? They weren't trying to tell me anything. None of that. And so, that's what I remember.

Calou: And then you started speaking out. I know that, you know, you and I talked a little bit about our experiences in retail and also in speaking out, but you ended up speaking up and out, and how did you end up leaving Banana?

Simone: Oh yeah, so I asked because again, there was a situation where he threatened to punch me, the guy—

Calou: The co-worker?

Simone: Yeah. Because I was trans. Or just like some—it was just like, it was just getting uncomfortable being around him. Um, so I asked to be transferred to another store, because my school was next door at FIT and I was always going to there and was always welcome. So I went there, I asked to be transferred, I kept requesting to ask to be transferred, okay, [inaudible], and finally they let me be transferred. Once I was transferred, same bullshit. It was like, I would get hours, but it wasn't enough. But at the time I was like, you know, I do not [inaudible]. And at the time, Islan Nettles had passed away around in August, um, and then I remember reaching out to Janet Mock. And I was like, hey, I know you don't know me, [Laughter], but you know, I'm very inspired by you. Um, and this, you know, something that's bothering me, you know, I don't know

like, if you know, but you know, I'm very inspired, so if there's anything that I can do to support. And then she at the time was like, connecting me with some other folks, and I introduced myself to her and we started a meeting. And the meeting became this thing called Trans Women of Color Collective. Uh, and lo and behold, I didn't know—I became a founder of something that is now about to be national, you know? Um, well now I'm a co—an ex—a former co-founder, I should say.

Calou: Well, you always co-founded it. It'll say that forever. [Laughter]. They can't take that away from you.

Simone: They can't take that away from me. Um, but it's all up on there. But um, yeah. Uh, what was the question again?

Calou: Oh, just how you were leaving Banana, but it was like, you were learning about like, all these different kind of ways of organizing.

Simone: My connection, um, and I connect to Islan Nettles' story because—and there was times that we would go to the group at Callen-Lorde that they would have to talk about—because it was a trans support group so we could vent about our transness, and I want to tell you how gorgeous this girl was. I mean, all trans people are amazing, I mean, unique. You know? Seeing her, there was such a light that was on her face. Gorgeous. Quiet. Yet making a statement at the same time. And she apparently went to Fashion Industry, the high school, also, so fashion was a part of her journey. So I connected with her when I heard the death of her because we were the same age, and I easily thought, that could have been me. That could have been me. So it, you know—at the time of her death and then dealing with this stuff at Banana Republic, I was like ah, shit, I need to be doing something more. This, you know, I just got out of school, of fashion design, and at the time I didn't even think that was enough to apply to the fashion industry because I was transitioning, you know, my first experience with interning for fashion design was like, racism. Like this woman asked me to walk her dog. I'm like, bitch are you crazy? You want me to walk your dog?

Calou: I'm doing an internship and I just got a degree?

Simone: Yeah, I just got a degree and you want me to walk your dog? Like, no, no, no, no. It's like, not tolerating it, you know? Not—so that experience made me not want to step into that career. And I was like, if I step into it, I'm going to step into it myself, you know? Um, yeah. So at the time I was like, you know what? Let me just connect with the girls in the space. To like, [inaudible] up for me and how I wasn't making money and stuff.

Calou: Like, figure out a way through it and how to—

Simone: One of the girls said, well I'm working in a resource center, I was like, does she—do you know anything about, you know, HIV stuff, and I was like no, no. And at the time also, 2013, I had made a decision to go to hair school. Like, you know, I want to start hair school because I think

you know, I need something to help me get money that I like to do, love to do, but fashion design for right now wasn't it. And my concept was like, if I go to makeup and hair school, put more money into school, I can learn so I can do people's hair and makeup.

Calou: And then you can like, work for yourself a little bit more than in the fashion industry you can't as much work for yourself.

Simone: Right, I can work for myself by doing hair and make-up, and save up money to buy fabric to sew. That was my concept. Child, jeez. So then, when the girl was like, well at my place where I'm working, at a resource center, they need trans women to help with a study. You know, it's a part time gig, I can put in a word for you, and she did. So I was doing two part-time jobs. So, Banana Republic, and that. Keep in mind, Banana Republic was not giving me hours, so it was like, barely like nothing. So thank God I had this other part-time job. And then, you know, when Retail Action Project, it was right around the corner from the second job, so I would just run over to kind of like meet with Sasha at the time to like, kind of have conversations about what was going on, um, and then we started thinking about action steps. What we were going to do, how we were going to bring it to their attention. So then we rallied up finally, I think about 2014, and we went to one of the Gap, because you know, Banana Republic is a sister company of Gap, and you know, we rallied and we you know let them know what they shouldn't do, because I realized that my story was connected to other stories that were trans and other stories of workers that were getting their shift cuts and hours and being, you know, discriminated against, and you know, I realized it wasn't just me, and seeing people were behind me rallying made it feel even more better. And you know, we had a list of stuff that we read off, and it hit in the paper. I was like my God, look at me being my advocate. Not even realizing that was something I could do. I was so fearful of worrying about what other people thought about me, and here I am making a footstep for myself in life. Yeah. Yeah.

Calou: It's powerful though, right? When you like, show up to this place that has so much control over your life, and you're like, excuse me, there are many of us, and like, we're not—

Simone: I was so fearful of what people thought about me. So fearful. So fearful about what people thought about me. Um, and wanted to be liked. I don't know what that condition is, but I wanted to be liked. I think it was because I was [inaudible] compassion. Because in my transness I didn't—everyone was shunning me. People in the streets were shunning me. I was hearing names. So I was looking for someone to like—until I met you know, [inaudible] and I saw other trans women and their greatness, and Laverne Cox was at that first meeting. I was like, ahh, [whicpsering] that's Laverne Cox, she's a celebrity. Literally had a stardom, um, I was like, oh my God, she was on P. Diddy. I was like, oh my God. Literally. But it felt good to be a part of, um, the space. They created space for me. Uh, they created a space to have conversation, to feel uplifted and things of that nature. And of course we all, as trans women, I've learned we're on different pages. So you know, folks go on to different paths, and folks went into greater things and greatness. Uh, and then folks said you know what, there's still work to be done. And that's where we are now.

Calou: Um, do you want to talk a little bit about that work, or do you want to talk a little bit about like the self care kind of stuff that you've brought up?

Simone: Yeah, so—

Calou: Or like, where you are with fashion? And now we can talk about any of those things.

Simone: Oh my goodness. So—[inaudible]—so now, I will say in terms of you know, being at, with TWOCC, at the time multiple things showed up. So we were doing—we were going to Buffalo, we were doing presentations, great things are showing up, but also I wanted to do some inner self—because I knew although I was transitioning there was something that still I needed to do to work on myself, you know? And you know, at Islan Nettles um vigil in Harlem, I you know, met with the pastor who spoke, and I started going to the church and stuff and then I met with this awesome, awesome, awesome—which is my best friend, Eunice Coleman, who is a reverend and trans. Um, told me about this workshop, momentum education, and you know, I took the course and literally I was able to look inwards and step into my I know that I matter and my what next, and you know, at the time I was like, you know, I love TWOCC, but is it what I really want to do, and the way that it is aligned with my values at the time, um, because I have different values and different ways of how to connect with people and I thought that, um, you know, at the time I felt like I was on different wavelengths, so I needed to focus more inward. Um, and still be supportive of their work, but focus on me, uh, and that's what I did, uh, to build, like, figure out my career and my artistry and all that other stuff. Uh, yeah, so I started, you know, at the time, multiple things happened now. I was working at a resource center, and then apply for a job, guess where people, as you may know, Callen-Lorde, to be, you know, a front desk worker, and when I told my job I was leaving, they were like no, you can't leave. We'll give you full-time now.

Calou: The research job?

Simone: Yeah.

Calou: Yeah.

Simone: So I started working full-time, and then the other job was like, Callen-Lorde was like, nope, we've got another job that pays more, here you go. I was like, what?

Calou: You're like wait, people are fighting over me all of the sudden. [Laughter].

Simone: And here was a—exactly. And that's why I named that, because it was a point where I didn't feel wanted. [inaudible] I connected with not feeling wanted, not feeling needed, and here I'm like—

Calou: You're just like disposable or replaceable—

Simone: Yes.

Calou: You're like, we got 10 new people [inaudible] that can come sell these sunglasses.

Simone: Yeah, uh-huh, and now I've got, you know, some place that's like, we need you.

Calou: Mmhmm.

Simone: Um, and I didn't even realize my greatness until momentum. So everything was coming full circle, right? Everything was coming full circle. And at the time I'm like oh, I'm getting close to 25 now, I already declared my surgery, [Laughter], now when is it going to happen? Why is it not happening? Um, and I'm like, oh, I don't want to leave this job, because I was so connected to the insurance at my research. Like, oh my God, great insurance, I can get my surgery, I don't have to—

Calou: Did they cover any trans care stuff?

Simone: I mean, yeah, because one of the trans women on there was fighting like hell and she made it happen, so I always thank her. Because she was like not, she was not a force to be reckoned with and she was doing the work in the field. Ida Hamm, I'm just going to shout you out now, love you girl. [Laughter]. But yes, you know, she made it possible. You know, by speaking up on things that she needed. She knew what advocacy looked like and because of her ways of being and saying yes to herself, she said yes to the community, because it allowed me to say I need that service too. And you know, she was very supportive about helping me apply for surgery and things like that, which was great. See, sisterhood is so important. There's nothing like it. I'm telling you. And then I'm like shit, I don't want to leave this job, because I need this insurance. Like, that was the reality.

Calou: So you got it covered and got to—

Simone: Like, the reality—

Calou: And then you had surgery?

Simone: No, the reality was like, I needed a new job because it wasn't in line with my values. So here I'm at a crossroad, it's like, I'm needed at another place. Um, my creativeness is calling me, but I also need change and this job in this research center is not in alignment with my values nor is it what I'm ready to do right now. And I feel like my ways of being and my what next is at this place. But if I leave, I was so in scarcity about like, how, and it wasn't just scarcity, the reality is like, I need to be affirmed. Like, I need my surgery. Like, that's what will make me feel like, if I were to pass out on the street. Because that was my fear. Like, if I was ever to [inaudible] on my street, and in my transness just be completely you know, like, passed out, knocked out, and the ambulance came and got me and they looked under my skirt and would deny me support and service. That was my fear. I don't know why. I was think in the summer like girl, you better drink all that damn water so you don't ever have to pass out, like, because like literally the train

reminded me when the train was stopping like, someone has passed out or someone is sick. And like, I don't want that to be me, because I would be afraid of not being treated, just because I had already seen it from workers, co-workers, so could you imagine if the ambulance came like oh, this girl is pretty, she's gorgeous, let's help her, and then the minute that I'll change, they'll be like Mr. So-and-so. The surgery was urgent. The surgery was my, my connecting to feeling free. Not feeling binded, like literally or figuratively. Like, I wanted to be free. So, um, I went to Callen-Lorde and I'm like you know what, I'm going to trust God. Because one of the things that is very important to me, like above everything with myself, is the God of my understanding, and the God of my understanding is a very loving God. So I was like, you know, I'm going to trust god, and God is telling me to move right now. So I need to trust. I need to trust. So I did it. And I'm like shit, my surgery is already scheduled, I'm not even sure if this insurance is going to cover it, so you know, I worked with HR, I worked it out, swapped over my insurance with them, and they were like, it's going to happen. Now keep in mind, my surgery was scheduled to happen in 2016 or whatever the case may be. And I'm like well damn, I'm going to be older than what I said I wanted to be or whatever, and literally, the day after my birthday—the day before my birthday of exiting out of 25, I got the call that I was going to have my surgery. It's like, look at declarations. [Laughter]. So I say it's always interesting, like, just saying and speaking what you want to the universe and like, you know, praying over it. But I also [inaudible] you know, some folks you know don't believe spiritually, but I literally let go of things. The first thing for me to look differently was changing my way of eating, eating healthier, letting to of sugar, letting go of meat. Just literally eating greens, fruits, grains, and like praying to the God of my understanding and really being connected to what was showing out for me, what was needed and required of me at that time. So when I left TWOCC, all of that was going through my mind. It was like, I need to be grounded in my meness, my newness, so I can step into my greatness and be able to be in service, not just for myself, but for others. And being in service for others is understanding that self care comes first. Um, so I said you know what? Fasting time. And I kid you not. I swear, I believe fasting really called that surgery earlier. Now keep in mind, the surgery that they said, my birthday is November 1, surgery happened December 1. Never forget the day. So it was like a rebirth. One month over. So it was like, what a perfect time. Um, and how I knew Callen-Lorde where I'm working now was just great because at the time I'm like, [sigh] to be transparent I was like, once I get my surgery I'm fucking out of here, like, [Laughter], because I was like I had enough of this community organization period. I'm like, what's lacking is trans spaces. No matter what organization I just felt like no one was getting it at the time. Like trans people are getting murdered and y'all are talking about whether or not to hire somebody who is qualified. Those qualifications are not even needed, so that's a thing, so whatever. But we're learning and we're working right? As an organization I'm seeing that we're working towards better in general. But one month later I had my surgery and you know, my mom couldn't come with me. That was by myself, and that's a surgery that you do not want to go by yourself, let's just be clear. But again, the reason why I said earlier about I was doing this journey by myself, because when I started I started by myself, and when I got to the graduation stage of feeling free and complete it was by myself. And I was so needed. So that fasting and everything was—

Calou: Going inward.

Simone: Going inward for a reason, and it gave me strength to push through. Like, my doctor who did my surgery—shoutout to Marcie Bowers, [Laughter], you know, like—

Calou: You went to Colorado?

Simone: Uh, yeah. I went to San Francisco.

Calou: San Francisco.

Simone: Yeah, Colorado—yup, yup, yup, yup. And it like just was like—it was the most emotional yet right on time now moment, and I cried. I cried when, you know, post-surgery, when I was able to just see myself naked and not have any discordant. Like, I was so connected with my body at that time. I was like yes, this is me. I cried so much that the whole room cried. Like, I was clear because there was a student who was there like, shadowing her, um, from Boston. And the first thing was I have a vagina, and I cried, like [Laughter] it was just. And I was crying, and it was like tears of joy, and she started crying too because she—first of all, she connected with what that meant for me, and the nurse connected with what this meant for me, because it was like—and it wasn't just a genital moment, it was literally, it literally it felt like chains was one me, and you know, like then it was broken. It was a magical moment for me. Um, and now I'm able to move with comfort. Like you know, I don't have to look back. You know, I can just keep moving. Like life, like freedom and being able to step into my like, newness in this complete body is amazing, you know? Yeah, so, yeah. [Laughter].

Calou: Yeah, I was going to like, ask you about a time where you felt seen, you know?

Simone: Yeah, oh, at the time?

Calou: Seeing you were seeing yourself?

Simone: Oh but at the time I felt seen was definitely when I looked down at what I call her sheshe. When I looked at my sheshe, I was like, I feel affirmed in this moment, like, and before surgery I was always a nudist, but like I would have to like, you know, I would have to do stuff to make it like—I just love—I never like clothes in the house. But now.

Calou: In the summer, too.

Simone: Chachis, yeah. But now? In the summer, and having my, and walking in the house butt-ass naked with roommates, it's like girl, this girl loves being naked to the point where they're like yes, it's Nala, what are you going to do? Like, [Laughter]. Oh girls, it's like, that's Nala. Like, it's just amazing for me, you know? And in that, and when I say in serving myself, I'm able to do the work. Because I'm in my consciousness and my graduation, right? Because I feel like each stage is a graduation, like a celebrating moment of my truth. I'm able to understand that not everyone is granted that moment. So I work extra hard in creating that moment for someone who resonates and wants that journey because understand that not all trans folks want that. You

know, not all trans women want the surgery. That doesn't make them less of a trans person or a trans woman or however they identify, right? Because we connect with our bodies in different ways. We are a microcosm of the world, right? So we can show up however we decide, and that's important for us to understand as people. And I knew that my journey was connected to another sister's journey who might want that, and understand that her barriers look different, right? Her path is different. You know, I had the opportunity to go to college. Some trans people didn't have the opportunity because they were pushed out of school. So I understand while I was working and advocating was to create spaces for other people to step into, you know, having resources, having insurance. So that's what I'm constantly fighting with now with my team is making sure that, you know, bills and laws and insurance—

Calou: It's like fighting this tedium to make sure that people can like see themselves.

Simone: Have their right. Have a right, you know?

Calou: It's a big disconnect, right?

Simone: When I had my surgery you know one of the things that [inaudible] was like, oh, I really need this surgery because you know, and they literally just stopped me and they was like, because it's your birthright. I didn't even grant myself the permission [inaudible] it was my birthright to have my surgery until someone said it. And it was like, wow. I'm fighting for my birthright. That's what I want. You know? Just like if anything would happen at birth through a certain—like, we would be having the surgery to rectify it, right? So when someone told me like, it's your birthright, it was like oh, yeah, I get it. I'm fighting for my birthright. Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't want to make you cry. [Laughter].

Calou: [Laughter].

Simone: That wasn't my intention!

Calou: It's okay, it's good.

Simone: Oh yeah, so I know that is important for me to fight for other folks' birthright. Uh, yeah.

Calou: Yeah, it's important. For, I was just thinking about—I haven't decided whether or not to have surgery and just haven't ever thought about it that way until you just said that, so.

Simone: Yeah, I hadn't, I thank my co-worker Gaines, like, you know—I would never—I always name people, especially when they drop important moments. You know, some folks I don't name for privacy reasons, but folks who like, in the community doing that, you know—

Calou: Doing this beautiful work.

Simone: Yeah, uh, he said you know, I was so happy. I'm like, you know, I really want my surgery, it's coming, I think it's coming, it's a year from now, but I want it now. And I'm like, I have to get on my insurance and I'm like, oh my gosh, what am I going to do, how am I going to get coverage? Like, you know, this surgery means a lot to me. I'm like, words cannot express it, but it means a lot. And literally, he said because it's your birthright. And it was like, woosh, it was like, it was the affirmation that I needed to continue to keep going to do—because sometimes you feel guilty of like, requesting support on, like why am I feeling guilty about requesting what I know I need from myself to be in this world comfortably. And not just surviving, but being. So I can be like, I'm a bomb-ass bitch. Like, that's how I feel like, I'm just like if this is what I want to be, not just because it's an image, not because of anything, because as he said, it's my birthright. So yeah, that was one of the moments of my life that I'm like, ah, I will never forget.

Calou: That's some wise, that's some wise shit.

Simone: Mmhmm. Yeah.

Calou: We're talking about all these people who have been so instrumental in you know getting you to like see and feel and accept all of this stuff, and I guess I just wanted to ask kind of what this community means to you, how do you think about that?

Simone: Community means to me—when I thought about that, I had a flash of my mom, who I would do—because one of the things that I said I was committed to was creating space for other trans folks to have a home experience. So like, every once a month I would have big dinners at my home for my TWOCC sisters to come over and us to just talk. Have girl talks like what you see on the TV. It was like, well what space are you going to find that? And my mom will cook a Jamaican feast—

Calou: And you go to your mom's house—

Simone: Like because at the time I was living, we had a home, um, and I would invite all the girls over and buy some moscato and we would eat some Caribbean food and just talk. And laugh and talk. So when I think about community I think about how I actively, um, choose to show up in spaces, right? Making sure that I'm actually listening to community um because in this work it's important to listen and understand that there's a voice of reason and there's a voice of need and that that voice looks differently from everyone. So it's how do I show up to make sure that these voices, you know, are at the center of the table, are actually being heard, right? I'm not speaking for them, but they're speaking for themselves, and if they're not there, I'm like well, this person needs to be heard, or remember when so and so and so said not taking credit for their story in the narrative, but so and so said this because this is what they experienced. But also, outside of community work, creating a place for them to be a human and connecting like, as families and chit-chatting and laughing and you know, snapping off the bra if we need to let, like, things breathe, you know? So community for me looks like um siblinghood. It's not just about work. It's about siblinghood. Yeah. It's like, I'm not just going to check up on you when I hear someone dies. It's like, constantly checking up on you and saying how are you, I see you, let's get a bite of

lunch. Did you eat this week? Yeah, how's money things going, you know? It's making sure that once I know this person is in my space and I'm not forgetting them and that I'm not forgotten, right? Because you know, isolation can show up as a bitch. Especially when like, society and Number 45 is talking like, I don't want to come out my house. Once President 45 started talking like, life sucks. But it's in that to say wait a minute, well, as a black person, you know, black people have been pushing through. So I've got to remember like, you know being trans and black and all my intersectionality is not going to stop me from being, um, and it's connecting with folks that are impacted by this. Yeah, so, community is like, loving up on one another and learning from each other, another, you know, and giving space when needed, because that's important too, right? It looks so many different ways. But the important thing that I've learned about community is connection and compassion and love. And especially justice, because we need justice in many different ways.

Calou: Mmhmm. Giving justice to one another.

Simone: Mmhmm, mmhmm. So true. Yeah.

Calou: So anyway, you have so much wisdom inside of you, and I know that there's so much more that we could talk about.

Simone: [Laughter]. Oh goodness, yes.

Calou: But you know, what's next, what about your art and what about relationships and what about you know, your parents now? And you mentioned—but I also know that we don't have—I don't know how much time you have, but if there's anything that you want to talk about that I haven't brought up or if there's any of those things that you—

Simone: So I'll say a brief of now, um, now in my, because at the end of the day it's even being trans I'm still a human. I'm breathing, and I understand that I'm connecting to something I want, so I step into ways of being and create connection to those who want connection. So. Just as my mom and I, we talk and connect, and you know, just recently she bumped into my father's cousin, and you know, my father's cousin was like, uh, how's your son? And she was like nope, my daughter. Like, literally—it was like come on mom, yes, come on and correct someone today. Um, you know? And my cousin from my father's side was able to receive it, and now I'm connected with her. One of the fears I had of leaving this earth was not knowing who I was in the foundation, even though I was creating a foundation. Was not knowing a part of me, all the parts. So you know, I've been talking with my cousin, I've been learning so much things about my father's side that I needed you know? So that's where I am now is connecting with family. In terms of art and creativity, you know, I'm still doing makeup and hair which is good because I now have access to a community who knows my work from [inaudible] a wedding, I went to South Africa, you know, to go to a wedding that I did her makeup for her pre-photo shoot, you know, and now like I met a guy in South Africa who like I'm talking to and knows I'm trans and in that is just so attentive to me. Am I fearful of jumping into love? Hell yes, which is why I'm like, I don't want a relationship that's long distance, let's just—but I'm willing and open to get to know

someone, you know? And I think that's you know I'm letting love flow through me and also being responsible while I'm connecting to with the things I do like and don't like. And it's my now creativity, what I'm going to do more of is dancing. And expressing, because like, one of the things I used to do again is dance. So I've missed dancing, so I find myself circling back to my foundation post transition. Because when I transition I stopped because I connected everything to my pre-transition, right? To the gender. So I stopped because I felt like I couldn't continue to do that because one it was like, how am I going to dance and have, you know, and be secure with not, you know, things slipping out or you know, just feeling like I'm in the proper body, you know, those things, and I stopped fashion design because well, I had a racist, you know, internship, you know? Or just like feeling like the fashion world wasn't affirming of trans folks, you know? Like I feel like now trans folks are having a visible platform, like let's be real. We didn't even have laws and policy to even affirm us, or to even say that we exist, and then you've got President 45 trying to erase the census, so like, [Laughter], these things are so impactful, and like, we're now having an intentional conversation about who we are as people right? So now it's about creating resources and spaces for that. So while I'm doing that, you know, advocating and talking about policies, I'm trying to create the spaces for myself. I'm taking ownership of it and saying I get to do this, I get to have this because I matter. Mmhmm.

Calou: Sounds like a really good plan. I like your plan. [Laughter].

Simone: Yeah. Thank you, [Laughter]. Wow, this is like the most honest and, I've been interviewed now but this has been the most exciting interview I've ever had where I've just been able to talk about my history. And I haven't even touched on all of it, so this is like, this is great that this is happening, so I'm excited.

Calou: Well we could do a part two or we could do a follow-up—

Simone: Listen!

Calou: We could do, we could do like—

Simone: Like 10 years, five years—

Calou: We could do a five year. Like, if you want to.

Simone: Listen.

Calou: We could do five years. I'll put it in my calendar and I'll call you. [Laughter].

Simone: Anniversary. One of the things I'm really excited for which I have to shout out is that um, I did an interview with PBS for this show called First Person. And I'm only saying it because PBS is one of those respectable channels. And I remember watching that as a kid. Who would have thought they would have a webseries that is LGBT—

Calou: Do you remember watching In the Life?

Simone: Yes! That's what I'm saying, like, and then like, we just had a premier recently. Uh, and I was there looking at some of the films, and somebody from the department of health was like, this is going to be a tool for us to create lessons and guidelines for the department of health for pre-K and up. And I busted out in tears. And I tell you that because—I cried because I said, oh, I'm getting chills now just thinking about it. What a joy it would have been to have some type of information about who I am, not of what people told me. Because everything, although they always say parents don't have a guidebook to be parents, but the foundation that we operate is binary, which is like, clearly have been made up, you know? When people talk about well, trans is and trans people are this, and how do you transition? And I'm like, well God is a God of transition, she gave us winter, summers, you know, fall and spring. You haven't complained about that.

Calou: [inaudible].

Simone: Right, right, it let's me—everything in this world is a—it's transformation, but to know that there is something now that is going to exist to give kids a tool that there might be one kid that connects with—that's me. There might be another kid that says, oh that might be my sister, or not my brother, or hey, I can support someone. It is the interruption of the bullying I experienced in school. It's the interruption of feeling siloed and isolated and other than, right? So to know that this is now going to exist and to know that I'm a part of this, I'm like what? Shut up.

Calou: Tell us the name of it so people could find it and watch it?

Simone: Oh, yeah, it's called First Person, and it's First Person LGBTQ+ and it's going to be a webseries starting in June 11, 2017. It's going to be different LGBT folks, folks of color, and they're talking about their journey. And expressing themselves through their journey.

Calou: Well, they're lucky they got you.

Simone: Well, thanks, [Laughter].

Calou: Yeah.

Simone: This is awesome.

Calou: Well, on that note, let's wrap this one up. To be continued in five years. [Laughter].

Simone: To be continued in five years. [Snaps]. The Trans Oral History.

Calou: [Laughter].

Simone: Awesome.