

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

STELLA DANCE

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Transcribed by Colette Arrand

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien, and I will be having conversation with Stella Dance 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 March 29, 2017, and this is being recorded at the NYU Department of Sociology. Hello.

Stella Dance: Hi. Good morning.

O'Brien: Good morning. Tell me, um, about your growing up.

Dance: Okay. Well, I was born in St. Vincent's Hospital, um, I'm one of a set. I came with a twin. Um, she was supposed to be born first, but I shoved her out of the way and um, my poor mom, she was in labor for over an hour, and then they put her under and my twin sister was a C-section, and my big sister was a breech, so the joke was I am the only one that knew how to be born right. Um, so um, St. Vincent's Hospital is of note because it was, you know, one of the only hospitals in the West Village for a very long time, and it got shut down, um, when I was a teenager, so that must have been quite a bit by now, and it was one of the only hospitals that was really serving that community that people who weren't rich could go to, so I always like talk about St. Vincent's Hospital and being born there and being like, then my career started as a queer advocate. Bladablada, great.

O'Brien: I think the very first ACT UP meeting, it occurred to them to walk over and protest at the Emergency Room at St. Vincent's.

Dance: Yeah, it's a very iconic hospital. Also not far from the Pleasure Chest, which was the first sex toy store I ever went into.

O'Brien: Excellent. Where—what neighborhood did your family live in?

Dance: Um, so, when I was growing up, it was called Windsor Terrace. Um, before that, the exact like, block I grew up in might have been considered, um, Sunset Park. Now it's all considered Park Slope. The house hasn't moved. It's stayed in the same spot, as houses tend to do, but you know, real estate, whatever. I remember when Park Slope used to just be the slope of the park, and it was very simple. [Laughter]. And now it is quite large, and it stretches all the way from like, downtown Brooklyn to Sunset Park and has swallowed Gowanus and is touching everything.

O'Brien: And tell us about your childhood.

Dance: Um, okay. So I grew up in a pretty big house. Um, my parents bought the house when you know, it was like, kind of a beater kind of house, and they were moving from Manhattan because they were like, oh shit, twins, apparently we need a bigger house, we were not expecting this. And um, they told me stories about smudging the house with sage because it smelled like cat pee so bad when they moved in that they had to get rid of the smell somehow. And my big sister is six years older than me, so she was already got a big personality when we were born. And um, I

was raised with my twin sister. Her name is Alexandra, and she was always very good at school, both the social school and like, you know, how to talk to people and interact like a human, and the academic sense of school. Any my big sister wasn't very good at academic stuff but you know, wasn't horrible and was pretty okay with the social stuff. And I had like a really hard time with both, [Laughter]. So that was kind of my childhood. Um, when—

O'Brien: What did you struggle with?

Dance: I had a really hard time with bullies, as is a common trans experience. Um, and much like many other people who struggle with bullies at a young age, um, it showed up in my, uh, having a harder time with academics, but it also showed up, you know, as having just a hard time learning how to be around people. I'm sorry, I didn't realize we were going to be crying so soon in this interview. [Laughter]. So let's see. We had a fire in the house when I was in 4th grade. Um, and that was kind of like, a hard time for my family. Um, growing up, when I was born I was born with a tumor in my hand. Um, and it had surgery when I was a kid, but it was always kind of like a theme in my childhood brain, because it was like, a notable marker of difference. Um, and my parents worked hard to get me, um, like, within the board of education, learning disabilities, and also within the board of education like legally disabled, and I got like a laptop that I could type away on which, on the one hand was really great of my parents, but on the other hand I was like, oh, I stick out like a sore thumb. [Laughter]. Here I am, this like, like really doesn't know how to act around people, like, strongly bullied person, sticking out like a sore thumb, having a computer, being disabled. Oh, it was rough! [Laughter]. Because sometimes bullies don't need a reason, but if they have multiple reasons, it's just like really easy for them, [Laughter]. And this was like, the 90s, before this whole like, Born That Way kind of movement took on, so like, I remember my teachers being pretty like hands off being like, oh the kids will sort it out, [Laughter]. You know, it's good for them to be bullied or some bullshit. Um, and this wasn't even like a horrible school. This was like a magnet school, where like, all the teachers were hippies, and like, thought they were feminists, [Laughter], but it was still totally, you know, the kids' responsibility to make sure they didn't get bullied, so that's a thing.

O'Brien: So they bullied—

Dance: We've come a long way, [Laughter].

O'Brien: Yeah. So you see the bullying as being connected to your visible disability with your hand and then the laptop?

Dance: Yeah, um, it was kind of connected to the laptop, it was kind of connected to like me not knowing how to act and also at a very young age, I knew that I was interested in boys, but I couldn't quite figure out what the relationship was between, do I want like, to be around boys? Do I want to be a boy? Do I want boys to see me as a boy? Like, what's going on?

O'Brien: Do you remember any stories of that?

Dance: Um, I remember when I was in 5th grade, you know, my school did an okay job not just like, dividing us by gender comparatively. I do have some, um, background in education as an adult, and I used to see that a lot and I was like, well I'm not doing that shit. But um, my school is actually pretty good at not just being like, one line for girls and one line for boys. It was pretty good at being like, people in column A versus people in column B. But you know, we did get split up a bit. And I do always remember having a sort of fascination with the boy's restroom and being like, that's where I want to be, and I couldn't tell you why. [Laughter]. Um, I also definitely remember um, getting my ears pierced, and like, this burning desire to have my ears pierced. Um, when I was a kid, because it's not—my story isn't so much about like, just like growing up and wanting to be a boy, it's very much growing up confused being like, I want people to readily look at me and see me as, you know, someone who they want to be around. So, when this whole people treating me like a boy thing wasn't working out so well, I was like, alright, I'm just going to be a girl then. So I'm going to get my ears pierced and everyone will see me as a girl.

O'Brien: How old were you at that point?

Dance: Let's see, that happened, and we were still living in the house. I don't even remember. I think, maybe I was seven.

O'Brien: Mmhmm.

Dance: On my 7th birthday we went to the ear piercing place and it was a very big deal, and I was like, I want my ears pierced, want my ears pierced, so everyone can stop treating me like a boy and start treating me like a girl. Um, because I remember being seven and everyone would just assume I was a boy, and that was very distressing to me. And I, like, I couldn't even tell you why. Um, there was just a lot of discomfort, [Laughter], around gender, because I was like, I don't know what I'm doing, you don't know what you're doing talking to me about gender, like, no one knows what's going on, and I don't feel very seen, so I'm just going to try everything until I'm comfortable. [Laughter].

O'Brien: How did you get along with your family?

Dance: Um, well, Alex got along very well with everyone, and Gretta was kind of doing her own thing, that's my big sister. And I remember family dinner was a very, very big deal in my family. Um, both my parents were working, my mom worked part time when the twins came because we needed a lot of work. I remember I was always trying to get out of school and like, because I was like, I am sick, I can't go, I don't want to go, I'm not going, [Laughter]. That was a running theme in my elementary school experience, um, and also a lot of like, being like, oh, what is that? I'm sick, I need to leave now, bye. Um, let's see, the question was about family. Family dinner. So family dinner, I—there was me sitting, it was a very strangely shaped layout. I guess it was trying to be egalitarian, but what it actually accomplished was my mom never actually being able to sit down, because we were still really stuck on the idea of mom serving everyone dinner, and she sat on the opposite end of the table. I couldn't tell you how the 90s were a strange time, because we had like, all these very, very feminist ideas that did not exist within the home environment

like whatsoever, because my mom served everyone food, and she cleaned up the table, and she was always asking us to help out, but that never meant dad. That always meant me or Alex or Greta. Anyway. Um, so I would sit down at the table, and um, Greta would be at the head of the table with my twin sister sitting across from me, and my dad sitting like, across from my sister and my mom sitting to my right. Um, and the set up was a pretty big deal, because it was just, um, me and Alex were always face to face, and whenever anything was awkward, how I got through everything was just by making everyone laugh. And things were often awkward because my parents were often fighting. Um, now they have kind of repaired their marriage since all the kids have left. They were the ki parents that were both very, very good at parenting in their, you know, in their marriage, and very, very good at marriage outside of their parenting, but were not the best at doing both things at once. [Laughter]. And they had three kids and were only expecting two, and that was like, kind of the unsaid elephant in the room. Um, and we didn't all necessarily always get along, the kids. I remember my twin sister and my big sister had like, this weird like, femme, [Laughter], like, cult that I was not allowed to join in. and whenever I would—and I also had like, kind of a problem play fighting with my twin sister. I don't know kind of where that came from, but you know, I was very into like, wrestling, and you know, kids in the 90s, it was like, play fighting was like, a lot more acceptable. And Alex, you know, really didn't like it. So like, my family members always kept an eye on me to make sure I wasn't like, bullying my little sister. And that's not how I saw it at all despite the fact that like, I did some horrible shit to her, which I still feel weird about. But I'm, I'm sorry, this is probably getting a little too—I don't know if this is pertinent information. Home was rough. Home life was rough. Growing up was rough. Um, I feel like I can't talk about being trans without talking about um, when I was in 4th grade it tried to commit suicide. Um, it was the year that our house burned down, and 4th grade and 5th grade were mixed, which meant that you know the 5th graders were like—and there were less of them than there were of us, and this was supposed to be good for our development, but what it actually meant was like, you know, they were the popular kids by default, [Laughter]. They were like, and they had their own exclusive club and they only talked to each other, and you know, except for a few select 4th graders that were deemed, like, cool enough to be a part of this kind of um hierarchy, and I was definitely not, but I tried my damndest. [Laughter]. And this was when fads in school were a really big deal, as both a denoter of class if you could buy your kid this weird thing that's just a fad, then you were more, you know, privileged, and if you could not, then you know, that was a thing. And um, before the attempt, there had been like all these fads that were passing through. One was like a Winnie the Pooh backpack of all possible things. One was like, jelly roller pens. And you know, while my mom did eventually you know, wear down to my asking and like, help me get my hands on these fad products, they were never enough to give me friends, and they were always just kind of like all these 5th graders—one in particular, her name was Elise—was always just like, get away from me, you're weird, this is weird. And um, I remember I was sitting at my dad's desk, um, because we were—we only had one computer. So, and this was when the internet was very, very new, and I was on my dad's computer, I think just to play like solitaire or Minecraft [Minesweeper?] which was a very big deal because you know, we didn't have video games. Video games were not allowed in my house because they were violent. Um, so all I had was Tetris on my dad's computer. And I was doing that, and I, you know, saw these pills, and I was like, that is the way to get it to stop, let me put all of these in my mouth. And, um, my parents—I was, you know, in fourth grade, and my parents, you know, saw that all

these pills were missing, and they were like, did you take them? And I was like, uh-huh. And they were like, okay, let's bring you to therapy.

O'Brien: Tell me more about your parents' reaction.

Dance: I think they were a little stunned. Uh, they were also like, in a significant amount of denial about how unhappy I was. Um, my mom was very much like oh, you just took the pills because you put two and two together and you knew that pills are things that you take when you're sick. Were you feeling sick? I bet you were feeling sick, so you just took some pills because of that reason. And I was like, okay. And she was like, oh think God. [Laughter]. Um, and my dad was like, [whispering] I feel like we should take her to therapy. And I was like, alright. Great. And then I remember sitting in the therapist's office and just being like, why did I do it? I, mm, um, mm, I don't know, my mom said I just wanted to take pills because I was feeling sick, so that sounds fine. And the therapist being like, oh, well why did you really do it? And me being like, I don't know what the fuck to tell you lady, like, I want to die. Like, leave me alone. [Laughter]. Um, I should also mention within that, this was—that kind of started up, [sniffle], I had been going to a like someone to help me like do my homework and do my learning disability stuff. I went through a lot of rigorous testing for the board of ed to get my learning disability stuff, which was a big deal for standardized testing, which was a big deal—is still a big deal in New York City—but standardized testing was like, I feel like it was more of a big deal, um, before. So I got like, time and a half on test, but I think my parents were just like very concerned that there was something deeply the matter with my brain at a young age, because I remember going to like, all these IQ tests and being like, well I don't know, I don't know what to tell you mom and dad. You know, this is the brain I have. This is how it doesn't work, and I don't necessarily know that I can tell you a problem. But they were all very, like adamant about like, oh, is it that you can't concentrate? I bet you just have ADD. And I didn't really know a way of being like, I don't know. I'm doing horribly in school, and you know, I'm not popular and no one likes me and that might be—you know, it was really weird to find the words to be like, mom and dad, I'm bullied, that's why I do really badly in school. Like, that was never like I thought that fucking occurred to them. Because they were like, you can't be bullied at school, you're going to this hippie-dippie magnet school, of course you're not bullied. Um.

O'Brien: What were you like as a teenager?

Dance: As a teenager, I was—I was a really bad teenager, [Laughter]. I was hell on my parents. Um, pre-puberty, I was just—I remember when my boobs started coming out, and I was just like, alright, sports bras forever. I am never, nope, have zero—not happening, I'm not wearing that thing. Um, and that lasted for, um, until 7th grade. Um, in 7th grade, when I went to middle school I went to middle school in Manhattan, and the bullying had escalated a fair amount in 6th grade and 7th grade. It wasn't like, one of those like fresh start moments. It was one of those, welcome to the real world moments, [Laughter]. Um, I had a lot of acne as a teenager. Um, which had started when I was in middle school and hasn't really, you know, there has never been a moment in my adult life where I haven't had it, it's always just kind of been like, on the side, and I just

leave it alone. Um, because that's genetics, I suppose. I don't know. Um, I don't know. Maybe it's the polycystic. I don't know. Um—

O'Brien: The polycystic?

Dance: Uh, polycystic ovarian, which I have, so it gives me like, extra testosterone.

O'Brien: Mm.

Dance: Um, when I was a teenager, let's see—I'll start, I'll try and make this as linear as possible. 6th grade, I went to a different charter school in Manhattan. Um, it was called School of the Future. We had computers everywhere. Um, I went to it because I liked the building and I applied and I got in. Um, and the bullying got much worse. In 6th grade, it—I still had three friends from my elementary school that had gone to this high school and the expectation was we would all be friends. And it became very clear that the two of them would be friends with each other and I would not be friends with them moving forward just because um her name was Menica and she and I—she had more money than me, and she ate out, eating out for lunch was a very big deal, and she was always eating out for lunch, and I did not have a big allowance, so I you know, it started this habit of me kind of making friends with kids that had more money and they would order food and I would eat some of it off their, you know, if they would let me have it, and it was like that.

O'Brien: Did your parents have less money than their parents?

Dance: My parents had less money than their parents. My parents were also of the belief that you know, I didn't need to be eating out every single day, that I should just start packing my lunch, and would not budge from that, despite whatever else was happening, which I don't necessarily fault them for. They stuck to their beliefs. But it did make me kind of an outlier in my school, so—and I wasn't packing lunch, because that was embarrassing, so I was eating takeout off of other kids plates when they would order too much food, which always happened, and I would make friends with rich kids and they would buy too much on purpose to let me have some, and that was the pattern until, um, let's see—7th grade it got really bad. 7th grade it was horrible. And that's when I started being like well, I'm just going to dress as femininely as I possibly can, and I'm not going to—and that's when I was like, alright I must figure out how to fit the fuck in or else I will not survive. Um, 7th grade is also really when I started dressing like, punk or goth, and being just like, letting the anger and hurt that had been within me just kind of boil outward. Um, it was also one of the worst times of bullying, uh, as a kid. There was this one kid, his name was Matthew. If I saw him on the street today, I think I'd punch him in the face. Like, there is like, it is not resolved. I will hate this kid until I die. Um, he was extremely popular, um, well, let me rephrase. He was popular, but he wasn't the most popular of the popular kids. He was like, the most bullied of the popular kids, and his way of kind of holding on to his power was putting all of it downward. So, um, so you know, and I was a really easy target. So um, and oh God, my teachers were horrible. I remember this one time where he like, like, like not only did my teachers not care, like there was this one teacher who sat me like, across from him at a desk to give us an

opportunity to work out our shit, like that's ever going to fucking happen. Thank you, ma'am, you taught my 7th grade class and you almost ruined my life. So we were sitting across from each other, and Matthew, the teacher's head is turned, and he just like, shoves my books off my desk, and I'm just sitting there kind of stunned. And then the teacher turns around and she's like, how come you don't say anything to him? How come you don't tell him to stop? And I'm just like, staring at her, just like, literally your job? [Laughter]. Like, are you insane? Like, and that wasn't the only time. Teachers would always be like, just tell him to stop, just bully him right back. And I'd just be like, how—but, question: What? What? [Laughter]. Like, are you crazy? Um, yeah, teachers not doing their jobs, and like, making this environment so either I—what they wanted to happen I suppose was for me to push back against this dude, but what actually happened was, you know, giving him every single opportunity they could for him to just like, you know, throw things in my face or push my books off my desk, and the running joke was like, him calling me Shrek, which was like, very funny to everybody else. That was like, hilarious. So, and like, when he made jokes, it wasn't just about him making jokes, it was about him making jokes to the rest of the class about me, and like, that was awful, [Laughter]. That was like, awful. Um, because you know, I had acne, I have broad shoulders, I, you know, I wasn't small, I wasn't petite. Um, and like, the only thing that made Matt stop was, you know, me, like, listening to punk music and just like, hanging out within the vicinity of everyone that like, listened to rock and roll music, who smoked cigarettes, who like, went to concerts and I just started emulating this sort of like, punk or goth look, just to make him stop. And you know, that's really kind of what helped me until you know, 10th grade, which also I started cutting school, which helped a lot as well. [Laughter]. Um, and that's really what made it stop was me just being like, first of all I'm going to take myself out of this equation by skipping school as much as possible. Second of all, I'm going to dress like the kids that you really don't want to fuck with. Not because any of them ever necessarily came to my defense, you know, in front of my face, but you know, there was a sort of mentality of you know very much like, it wasn't like X-Men comics like if you fuck with one of us you fuck with all of us. It was a little bit more like you know, West Side Story, like don't start no shit, won't be no shit, [Laughter]. Um, and then by 10th grade, my best friend was a cis gay dude, his name was Eric, and um, I was friends with him starting at about 8th grade and then 9th grade, and then 10th grade, and you know, me and him kind of—he was popular enough um, to kind of help me make the bullying stop, and that was my first relationship with another queer person, and it had many problems. A lot of Eric telling me, you're just a gay dude stuck in a woman's body, and me being like, you say that like you mean to be nice, but I don't think you realize what all you just said means, [Laughter]. Um, and that was pretty transformative. Eric had more money. Um, and he was Italian. And—or Italian-Jewish, which is very specific, and you know, my mom is Jewish and we bonded over the whole Jewish thing, and uh, he also had like, ADHD, and I had ADD, so we kind of like, were on the same energy level a lot of the time. And he actually got me into magic stuff, which has lasted me the rest of my life since.

O'Brien: Magic stuff?

Dance: Yeah, magic stuff. So, magic stuff is pretty important right now in queer identity. But um, for a lot of people this started much earlier. Um, so when I say magic stuff, I'm not talking about Dungeons and Dragons, that actually came later. I'm talking about the ability to like, you know,

meditate and read tarot cards and like, learn how to protect yourself via doing energy work, and how to lay hands on people. And um, Eric was my mentor in all of that, and I charge now for those services on the side, as a side gig. I'm a professional tarot card reader, and I've been doing that professionally for like, five years now, and I also—I guess it must be more than five years, because it was like five years like five years ago. Um, I was just on a podcast that one of my co-workers does talking about astrology and sex, and um, magic. Like, I didn't necessarily start believing it as a kid because I needed an escape so badly, even though you might think that's the case. I started believing in it because, you know, I started doing it, and it started working for me. And like, every little bit counts, and it, you know, helped. Um, it kind of gave me this idea that like, you know, what I have inside myself is unique and not necessarily awful, [scoffs]. And it gave me kind of power over that. so that was cool. Um, I remember one day, like, Eric bringing me over to Enchantments where the person who had taught him a lot of magic was kind of hanging out all the time. His name was Joe, and he—

O'Brien: Enchantments?

Dance: Enchantments is a magic store in, um, Lower Manhattan, and you know, if you're a teenager, you can't necessarily hang out at a bar, so you go hang out at a magic shop, [Laughter]. So me and Eric were hanging out at Enchantments one day, and Joe comes out, and Joe was like, fostering Eric in this magic tradition and in a more hands-off kind of way, but they knew each other, and Joe met me and he was like, oh yeah, I see what Eric was talking about, because I was what is called a natural witch. And natural witches, there's a lot of discussion, but if someone is born a natural witch, what it basically means colloquially is that they can—they're automatically doing magic as we speak, [Laughter], and if someone is a you know non-natural witch, it means that they have just as much capacity to do magic eventually, but it means that they are not already doing it. Um, it's just kind of like, if you are already doing it and don't know how to control it, or if you are not already doing it and you need to, you know, learn how to do it via control. So it was a big deal teaching me like, how to stop doing unintentional magic. Um, and I worked with Eric and Joe about that.

O'Brien: What forms of unintentional magic were you doing?

Dance: Oh, well just, I um, it's kind of hard to, uh, if someone doesn't—for a lot of people who are just starting off doing magic, um, and for a lot of people who are natural witches but they don't have any like, training necessarily, um, one common mistake is letting other people's energy really, really affect you, or like, maybe like, get into you in a bad way. Um, some people call this being empathic. Empathic, I would argue, is when you're doing it on purpose, [Laughter]. And you know, there is a degree of control you can learn to have about that, but people who are natural witches who don't have training yet, um, tend to always kind of like, feed off the energy in a room or poison energy in a room or just don't have really good boundaries about letting other people's energy efficient then and vice versa.

O'Brien: Was, um, magic helpful for managing the bullying, or avoiding—

Dance: I didn't put a curse on anyone—

O'Brien: Negative attention?

Dance: Um, but it was really, really helpful when it came to valuing myself.

O'Brien: Mmhmm.

Dance: And that was the single most thing that got you know, the bullying situation under control besides like the black nail polish and the look. But you know, that only lasted until 10th grade, when I went to—I put myself in boarding school. [Laughter].

O'Brien: Oh my. How did that happen?

Dance: So I was—it was 10th grade, I was cutting school about every single day, and that was a problem. And my parents found out, and there was a lot of fighting and a lot of crying, and they said, you know, we're, you know, my mom had like, talked to a co-worker, and my mom's co-worker was like, you should put her in boarding school. And my mom was repeating this back to me and I was like, that's a choice? That's an option? I'm sorry, [Laughter]. No one told me that was an option, sign me up.

O'Brien: What was appealing about that?

Dance: Not living with my parents, not living with my sisters, um, starting over.

O'Brien: What was your parents' life like at this point?

Dance: Um, my mom was working full time, so was my dad. My sister was excelling in school. She was at a different school than me. Um, my big sister was like, 17? 18? Um, and I was doing a lot of painting at the time? So I, um, and I was also going to therapy every single week, and I had since the first suicide attempt, and it was not particularly helpful. [Laughter].

O'Brien: So help me understand. So the boarding school was attractive to you, but school had been a place of a lot of violence and harassment up to this point—

Dance: Yeah.

O'Brien: So did you think that boarding school would shift that?

Dance: Getting away was really cool in my head, and I really liked the idea of escape.

O'Brien: Hmm.

Dance: Also, I was painting a fair amount.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Dance: And the more I think about it, yeah, painting was a big deal. There was—I'm sorry, sometimes it's hard for me to remember. There was another suicide attempt, um, in 9th grade. Maybe it was 6th grade. I forget. What I remember was I was at after-school painting class, and that's where all the punk kids went to like, paint, um, because that was a thing. And the painting also really helped both the bullying stop and the me kind of learning how to like value myself and my artistic shit. That's like where all the like, cool goth kids hung out, because everyone was like, oh, I'm so goth, I'm going to paint my inner mystery, [Laughter]. And at that point, you know, I had gotten pretty expressive and I took all these paintings with me, and I talked to my therapist and I was like, I want to go to boarding school. And my therapist was like, oh, actually you know, I have some family that were part of a boarding school and you know, in a teaching sense, and that's the boarding school I went to. I got an interview, I brought some paintings with me, I was charming and artsy, and the school you know was like, cool. I remember at my interview for boarding school I talked about like Chuck Jones, which was one of my first nerdoms. He did a lot like, animation and Loony Tunes, and I started folling him as a director, and there's a lot there. Um, and I talked about how much I really liked, um, certain movies, and I talked about my paintings, and I talked about like, how much I really just wanted to do art all day.

O'Brien: How did you afford it?

Dance: So I did get a bit of a scholarship.

O'Brien: Mmhmm.

Dance: And to the interview, my parents were like, listen, if they give you a full scholarship, you can go. If they give you a part scholarship, you can't because we can't afford it. And I was like, okay. Alright, I just—I knew I was going to go, I didn't know how I was going to make it work yet. Um, they did give me a partial scholarship, and my parents changed my minds. They were like, you know what? It's better if you just go here. You want to go here, they want to have you here, we don't want to have you here, like. But they didn't ever say that, but it was very obvious. Um, so that's where I went. And it's not because they didn't love me, you know? Growing up I always knew I was extremely loved and I still know that, but it was really, really hard. My relationship with my parents has never been easy.

O'Brien: What kind of work did your parents do?

Dance: So, my dad taught high school chemistry class. Um, and my mom was an administrator at a college at this point.

O'Brien: So you went off to boarding school.

Dance: I went to boarding school, I repeated 10th grade, um.

O'Brien: Where was it?

Dance: This was in Massachusetts. And um, you know, it was really, really a huge mix of very, very good and very, very bad. The bullying stopped. That was like, the first experience of you know, like that not being a huge part of my life. Um, like everyone thought I was weird, but like, this was a very unique boarding school, there were only 100 kids here. Like, on purpose. Like, not 100 kids in each class, like 100 kids period. Which is like a hippie-dippie weird boarding school for kids who liked to do art. Um, so everyone was very weird, and week, high schoolers get sick of each other very easily. So we all kind of—you know, if you're stuck in a room with people for long enough, you're going to either learn how to get along, or you're going to not. And that was kind of the premise for the school. And like, people were starting to get along with me and like value me and like, laugh at my jokes just because like, you know, it's me or nobody. And that was actually pretty cool. Um, and I did a lot of art and I did a lot of stuff, and you know, while I didn't—a lot of kids would like, sneak out and smoke pot or like, sneak out and drink, or sneak out and just like, be rebellious, that's pretty much when my rebellious streak stopped, because I didn't want to be kicked out of school. Because it was like, the best thing that had happened to me. And my grades also shot up. Like, all of the sudden I was smart, and I was like wow, [Laughter], this is new and different.

O'Brien: But some things were really hard?

Dance: Yeah, some things were really, really hard. Puberty is always really hard. Puberty, and puberty was still happening. And this was at the time in puberty for me when like, romance was a really big deal. I mean, romance had always been a really big deal, but um, romance was a particularly big deal when I went to boarding school because all of the sudden I'm around these people all the time and there's no escaping. Um, and I don't know if I'm ever going to feel like that about anyone ever again, where I just like, I'm just like, oh, I love this person so much, I love them, I love them, I love them. I'll actually talk to them one day, ever. Because I was not into talking to people who I had crushes on. I like, very specifically did not sit next to the people during lunch that I had crushes on, I didn't try and talk to them. Like, I told all my friends about how in love with them I was, and I left it there and like, did not even attempt to like, get to know them on any sort of level. And, um, because I guess I was that kid growing up, and it wasn't until I was an adult where I was like, oh, I think you're cute, maybe I should talk to you.

O'Brien: Who would you develop crushes on?

Dance: Um, let's see. Um, for most of my growing up, it was always like, boys or masc people. Um, but that did change a lot, um, in terms of like, I just—I remember going online and like, Googling these people I used to have crushes on and like, more than one of them is now trans, and I'm just like, how did that happen? [Laughter]. Um, yeah. But yeah, I don't know. Um, yeah, so I remember that's also like, when I got really into poetry. Specifically like, poetry about how much I had like, really big crushes on all these people.

O'Brien: So what happened when you finished with boarding school?

Dance: Um, then, I went to college. And that lasted not long. Um, I went to a school in North Carolina. Um, I really didn't want to think about applying to school, because I couldn't bear the thought of not just being where I was had been like, very transformative and dear to me, and everyone was like, oh, you want to get out in the world, you want to go live your life. And I was like, no I don't, I want to stay here in the bubble, [Laughter], please don't take it away from me. Um, and you know, I got really, really into—I thought I was going to be a history major. And one of the, uh, and uh, the boarding school that I went to had like, very, very minor like Quaker associations, um, so I liked the idea of going to a school that felt the same way that my boarding school felt, so I looked at Gilford, I looked at Erlam, um, and I you know, and I also looked at Wier, which—

O'Brien: These are Quaker colleges?

Dance: Yeah, these are—these are colleges that like, are on the smaller side, that were in, you know, colleges that change lives, which my mom was really into. And these were private schools, and these colleges. And I applied to like, a bunch of them. I applied to like, many, many different colleges but I also like, researched none of them. And I did not see the huge problem with going to a school in the south while being any amount of queer. Because I wasn't really identifying as queer at that time. I just knew I was weird. Um, mmhmm. So, let's see. College, I went to college. That happened. Um, for—here's what I will say about it, to keep it concise: Um, I went to college. I—all the restraint I felt like I had to keep about like, not smoking too much weed or drinking too much kind of went away. Um, I was faced with huge amounts of culture shock going from both a very, very small boarding school to a very, very big place, not a big college, but a larger place where there are you know if you wanted to avoid someone you could. I dealt with a lot of—that was kind of the first time of me ever dealing with people in the south. Um, and it was, you know, both rewarding and shocking to you know, I had a roommate who was engaged, and I was like, what? And she was like, "what," what? Um, and that was, you know, I dealt with a lot of the, like, genuine Southern heteronormative we hate gay people-ness, and I was like wow, I thought this was make believe. I did not know that this was real. Um, and I also dealt with like a lot of like, True Grit southern racism for the first time, and I was like, I was not prepared. This is like actually a huge deal. And I did not know that this still happened, but it's very much the reality, and northern life has not prepared me for this reality whatsoever. Everyone up north just pretended that it didn't happen, and I was not prepared. Um, and I dealt with a bunch of culture shock, I dealt with different boundaries around myself and you know, drinking and smoking weed, and I also still had, you know, a lard of the hard ingrained habits like, skipping school when I wasn't feeling good came back, and so did the mental illness. Came back pretty hardcore, um—

O'Brien: The mental illness?

Dance: Well, I've had—I'm not necessarily sure when it is appropriate for me to start calling it mental illness and not like, and then I tried to kill myself again. [Scoffs]. Uh, which had happened already, uh, twice. Um, but when I was in college it went from oh, I think I will commit suicide, it

went from that to being like, oh, I, you know, have schizoaffective. And that's when I got a lot of things happening in my brain that were like, strange and new to me, and very different from anything that I was dealing with when I was a kid, um. I lasted until about spring, um, the psychosis had gotten extremely bad. Uh, and it was affecting like, not just how I was doing in school, but it was also affecting uh, my physical body. I had lost a large amount of weight. And I went to, um, services at the college and I was like, I think I'm going nuts, [Laughter]. Maybe I should get some help. Um, and um, they got me into a "behavioral health facility," which is what they call it down there, and then I was in the hospital. My parents—um, that was a very bad, strange time. Um, within, before the whole break, I can lay it out in terms of what had been happening to me. Um, that was also a time when I was like, having sex for the first time. And it was, you know, less than consent oriented. Um, there was a huge culture of get them drunk and fuck them that I was not prepared for, and I was not necessarily—and you know, that acted in a lot of ways to my benefit. Whenever I wanted to smoke or drink, there it was. I never had to pay for any of it. I just had to like, dress femininely and smile and things would pass to me. Uh, now some of that was rape culture and some of it was southern hospitality, and I couldn't tell you where one stopped and the other one started. Um, and that's also—I was, you know, I had a few, I had one specific near-miss with date rape, and for me that's really when I noticed, uh, if I could put any single thing on psychosis, that would probably be it.

O'Brien: So you were in a behavioral health facility hospital.

Dance: Yup, and my parents came, and my mom picked me up, and I went back to New York.

O'Brien: Do you want to share anything about the experience of the hospital? Or psychosis?

Dance: There's a lot of work to be done about, you know, queerness and craziness, [Laughter]. And I don't know where to start, but I could go on all day. Um, what happened to me was I got put on the maximum dose of Seroquel and Risperidone, and if anyone knows anything about what happens to you if you go on max doses on both Seroquel and Risperidone at once, uh, I gained all that weight back and then some at an extremely rapid rate. Um, I also ceased to be a person. Because if you're on max doses on both of those, you're either going to be eating or you're going to be sleeping or you're going to be trying to be awake, and it doesn't really leave much person left besides those three things.

O'Brien: What had been your experience of psychosis?

Dance: Oh, here's what I will say about that. Shit was very strange, [Laughter]. Uh, I hear people taking psychedelics like, you know, as something they do for fun, and I'm always just like, you do you, that's not my thing. I guess maybe the opportunity to consent makes a big deal when it comes to psychedelic tripping versus like, you know, being crazy. Um, I was hearing voices, I had delusions, um, I'm not going to go into the specifics too much but I can give you some Sparknotes, [Laughter], um, I remember having a strong fear belief that I was—I had hallucinated this sort of vision of myself contracting some horrible form of HIV and giving it to every single person that I loved, and then they would give it to the rest of the world, and then everyone would die. And I

would be the person that started the plague that ended the world. Um, I also—delusions aren't so much necessarily a spreadsheet of organized ideas that all fit together—it's a little bit more like, I don't know, the Bible, where you have all these disjointed mythos that come together sometimes, and sometimes don't. Um, there were times I thought I was, uh, pregnant, and the Virgin Mary, and going to give birth to some sort of savior-type person, I don't know. Uh, it also can be really hard to remember psychosis when you're not currently in that same state because a lot of—first of all, schizophrenia will ruin your brain, [Laughter], you will not be able to remember anything. [Laughter]. Second of all, um, there is something to be said for, um, like, uh, you know when you're drunk and you can't, and you put your keys away and then you wake up and you're sober, and you can't remember where you put your keys, and then you might have a mimosa and then you know where your keys are? Um, that—the same, you know, I think it's called—I forget what the fuck it's called, but it's when, you know, certain substances, if you, you know, that whole study high take the test high type behavior, there's something to that, and like, I can remember—

O'Brien: Like parts.

Dance: I can remember, you know, more what being crazy was like when I'm ever getting close to craziness, so for me that actually works as an alert system these days. If I remember more and more about like, what it was like when I was crazy, I'm like Oh, okay, you know? That's coming back, let me keep an eye on that.

O'Brien: And you said a lot of work uh, needs to be done on queerness and mental illness.

Dance: Uh-huh, [Laughter].

O'Brien: And how—what were some of the ways that was bound up for you?

Dance: Oh my God, so um, so I remember—mm, there's a lot of work that needs to be done about mental illness in general. I remember sitting down as close to this person in college services as I am to you now, and I remember being like, hi, I hear voices, I think maybe that is something that is affecting me. [Laughter]. And she was like, oh, you're not schizophrenic. And I was like, really? [Laughter]. And she was like no, if you were here, you know, everyone sort of has, you know, imaginative ideas about what voices could be saying, but if you were schizophrenic, you'd be hearing them like, the way I'm talking to you right now, that's how you'd hear them. And I was like, uh-huh. That, that's the thing. And she was like, no, but you're normal. And I was like, I don't know what you want me to say. [Scoffs]. So getting help was strange. Getting help was strangely hard. Um, everyone has these ideas about like, oh, you're hearing voices, and obviously not in the way that crazy people do because you're not crazy, because I don't know even what—I don't know. I don't know what was in their heads.

O'Brien: Was that about class and race, or what was that?

Dance: Maybe it's because I was white, maybe it's because I was well-spoken, but I think it was because I wasn't like, half naked, banging on a pot and a pan. But no doubt, if I was a person of color they would have locked me up much sooner. Um, yeah, I remember what got me into—people also have weird, fucked up ideas about what it means to be crazy versus what it means to be smart, [Laughter]. Like, I will tell you, what got me into the hospital in the first place was me being like, okay, I'm going to weigh this logic. On the one hand, I you know, going to save everyone on the planet because I'm pregnant with the savior, or on the other hand, I am losing my mind. And I've already explored option A a fair amount. But I haven't done that much research on the [inaudible] hypothesis here. So maybe I should. [Laughter]. And you know, what got me into the hospital in the first place wasn't me being like, oh, I'm definitely nuts. It was, I'm entertaining the idea that this is all in my head, and I'm doing research, [Laughter]. I'm going to explore this possibility. Uh, people will be like oh, mental illness, mm, yeah, you have no idea what's going on. People with mental illness may have, you know, a fair, you know, all of our faculties may or may not be working, and it has very, very little to do with like, our ability to reason. Specifically schizophrenics. People have this idea that schizophrenics just do all these crazy things because it's a Tuesday, and you know, schizophrenic people may be experiencing weird ideas about reality or have, you know, strange things going on in their head, we might hear voices, you know? I remember specifically my roommate to try and cheer me up from this haze took me to like, a department store, and I was hearing voices in my head and they were helping me pick out which underwear to buy, specifically so I could go like, you know, have sex with some people later that day. Um, like, all that can be happening and yet, you know, one can still, you know, use scientific method to reason themselves into a psych ward, so like people have ideas about schizophrenics. Like, oh, we just need to be like in a padded room and we don't know what's going on like, while we may be experiencing something that you have zero idea what to do with or what that even like, where did that come from? I have no idea. We don't stop being people. [Laughter].

O'Brien: Anything else that you want to share in this interview around your psychotic episode or hospitalization before we move on and take a break?

Dance: Um, I've rattled on for quite a bit. Um, I have a bullet point list of things that I would like changed in the future regarding transness and mental illness and queerness and mental illness. First of all, to everyone who is a professional working in the psych ward that I was staying at for any of the number of times that I was staying there at, stop putting people on max doses of Risperidone and Seroquel at the same time. That's not helping. If someone is too asleep to be crazy, that doesn't make them healthier or saner. Second of all, please, when—I've been proposed to more times than I can count while in the psych ward, and it's never comfortable and it's never helpful, so please stop with that. Um, so if you hear of one patient proposing marriage to another patient, please just stop that from happening. That's not helping anyone heal. That's not helping the person who proposed heal. And letting someone get away with that is not, or just like, not addressing it as a problem behavior, isn't helping them. And it's certainly not helping me, so thank you for prioritizing those people over me when we were both in the hospital to heal. Um, also, I remember describing my, like, feelings of weird sexuality to this one person while I was in the mental health hospital, one of the various times I was there, and every single person

was like, oh, you're having, you know, psychotic behavior, and you're, you know, dealing with psychosis, and you also are dealing with these like, big mood things, um, and you've, you know, this big psychotic break and the suicide and all that, that sounds like schizoaffective, or it sounds like um, bipolar with psychosis, and I was like okay, okay, okay, that all makes sense to what I am experiencing, and then I talk sexuality with the first doctor I get who is not a dude, and I'm talking to this lady doctor and I'm just like blah de blah de blah da, you know, I read somewhere that people with schizoaffective have, you know, like blah de blah de blah da sexuality, blah de blah de blah da sexuality, blah de blah da. And this is the only doctor that I got that gives me a personality disorder diagnosis as, you know, the one, the really fucked up one that nobody wants, the ones they accuse Trump of, like, what is it? I don't even know.

O'Brien: Narcissistic?

Dance: Yes, that's the one. This one lady was like, you talk about your sexuality a lot, you have narcissistic personality disorder. There needs to be a way for someone to talk about sex and someone to be crazy and then not to automatically have narcissistic personality disorder. Like, are you kidding me? Like, what? [Laughter]. Um, also, yeah. I remember the idea that I might not be a woman coming up a lot in that year, and I felt like, you know, I couldn't even talk about it to my therapists, because they were just going to like, lump it together with the whole schizophrenic you think you're a werewolf, of course you think you're a boy kind of a thing. So I didn't even talk about it for a really long time. That's what I'll say about mental illness for now. Um, I remember actually being comforted by knowing that I had mental illness, um, as an adult, and being like oh, I've parsed out the magic stuff from the crazy stuff and they're different. Now I'm going to parse out the gender stuff from the crazy stuff. Oh, look, all these trans people have a history of mental illness. Oh, all these trans people I know have a history of being bullied in school. Oh, it's almost like I'm part of a systematic problem, and I'm definitely not an isolated incident. I wish someone would have fucking told me.

O'Brien: Are you up for a break?

Dance: Yeah, that sounds good.

O'Brien: So, before the break, we left off, you talking about psychosis and your hospitalization.

Dance: Mmhmm, yup.

O'Brien: And then your family came and got you?

Dance: Yup, um, I was in and out of the hospital for, uh, once in North Carolina, and then they came and got me, and then I, uh, was part of a day treatment outpatient program for about a year and a half, two years, um, through New York Hospital. Um, I still—one of my best friends I still have from that time. Um, and what really helped me get out of that place, um, more than anything else, was my dog. I got a dog, I was still living with my parents, and I really, really was having a hard time at this point figuring out why I was still going to be alive after all of this. Um,

and, I was in and out of the hospital, and I was in the hospital and I was like, you know what I want is a dog. Because that will just be why I'm alive is to take care of this dog. And I told my therapist and I was like, I'm getting a dog. And um, and I, you know, when my parents came to visit me in the hospital, um, the therapist went ahead and told them my plans to get a dog, and my parents were like, you're not getting a dog. And I was like, yeah I am, and they talked to the therapist and the therapist was like, we don't have a better idea, so I got a dog. And after I got the dog I was only in the hospital for one more time. Um, I was part of the day treatment center, and that helped introduce me to some CBT stuff, and what I really, really liked—um, that's cognitive behavioral therapy for people who haven't been in and out of the hospital a bajillion times—what I really, really liked about, um, what I did get of value out of the day treatment center I was at was CBT, um, it was, you know, tracking different ways to deal with thoughts. It was, um, I got a lot of really, really great friendships, um, some of them were just momentary, but you know, one of them has been lasting since then, and um, just like being around people who are also crazy and learning how to be friends with them is one of the major ways that I, you know, got through that time. Um, because you know, I finally had a friend who was just like, oh, me neither, totally skittles, but let's do it, [Laughter]. And you know, I could—and I still talk to—his name is Dan, he's one of my best friends, he's one of my oldest friends. I still talk to Dan all the time, and that was the first time I'd ever talked to someone who was crazy, just as crazy as I was, about like, sex and fucking, and we'd talk about sex and fucking like, all the time, and it was normal, and then I was like, oh, [Laughter], this doesn't have to be like, a horrible thing. Um, and so, and yeah, and I stayed alive because someone had to feed the dog, and you know, I didn't really value myself that much at that point, but the dog was enough, and like, you know, that is also a time when I had like, gained a significant, significant amount of weight because of the meds I was on, and they were having a really big deteriorating affect on my metabolism as well as my teeth. It's a well-known fact, many antipsychotics and antidepressants will give people teeth problems after awhile, and mental health, mental illness is pretty bad, hard on the teeth to begin with, because it kind of takes away one's ability to kind of like take care of one's self properly. Um, and uh, a lot of drugs will kind of prohibit the salivation production, which sounds weird, but that's one of the major problems that I talk to a lot of people with mental illness is like, okay, first of all it was hard to take care of myself. Second of all, my mouth wasn't working properly, so now I have all these tooth problems. I was, uh, I got really, really sick one weekend, like physically sick, and they were like, oh, your intestine, you know, you have—your appendix is infected. We should, like, remove it. And then the doctor talked to me afterwards and he was like, your appendix removal was a lot more involved and complicated because you're obese. Um, and I need to run your blood numbers, but we think you're pre-diabetic, and we might need to put you on insulin soon. And that was like a real wake-up call for me to be like, wow, these meds are like, you know, ruining my health. [Laughter]. Um, so, to the great—you know, and there's a big culture of compliance versus non-compliance in the mental health industry that needs to change, and I say industry specifically um because [sips drink], it, you know, for as much as it is a service that we can be provided by, it is as much an industry. Um, and that that point I was on Abilify instead of Seroquil and Risperidone and that really, really helped me not have the same metabolic problems. I was also on Wellbutrin instead of Prozac or Zoloft and that really, really helped me not have quite the same amount of um, Wellbutrin is a low-grade upper, so that helped me kind of get my body moving and get up there, but you know, unbeknownst to too

many people I was also becoming slowly very un-compliant with my meds, um, and I stopped taking a fair amount of them. And I also started running. And I, you know, stopped eating. I changed my diet dramatically. Um, I had picked up binge eating, you know, in the time that I had been crazy. I wasn't—I had never really been a binge eater before the Seroquel and Risperidone, but I had been kind of like a secret eater, because my parents were always very controlling over how much I should eat, and they were always like, you need to stop eating so much meat, and I was like no I don't, and they were like yes you do, and I, you know, so—growing up I had been eating a fair amount in private when I could. Um, but after the Seroquel and Risperidone for about two years I was significantly, I had a huge problem with binge eating, which I still deal with. Um, thanks Risperidone. Um, anyway, back on linier timeline, I, uh, ran it off. I was not pre-diabetic after a month. I committed, and, you know, I would take my dog with me and we would run around Prospect Park, and I was determined not to go on insulin, and I also stopped taking many of my meds, um, after I got my appendix removed, and it started off with me being in the hospital, um, and the people in the hospital were like, oh, what meds do you normally take as part of normal triage, and I was like, all these things that affect my GI tract: Risperidone, Seroquel, uh, Wellbutrin, or Abilify, whatever the fuck I was on at that time. I forget what. But every—all of that does affect GI tract pretty significantly, either you can't poop or you have diarrhea or—that's kind of what no one talks about with mental illness drugs is they will fuck up your GI tract one way or another and there's no getting around it if you're going to take them. Um, and I just had my appendix removed, meaning I had only just recently stopped vomiting, and I was like, I'm not taking these meds right now because I will rip my sutures, because I will violently vomit. I can't evne hold food down, there's no way I'm going to be able to handle these GI meds—these mental illness meds that affect my GI—like it's not happening, [Laughter]. And my doctors were awful, [Laughter]. I had my therapist yelling at me to take these GI meds because you know, you can't be off because you'll be, you know, you won't be getting along with the program that we have you on, and me being like, are you nuts? Like, I just had part of my intestines removed, and I can't eat right now. There's no way I'm fucking taking these. And then I had my doctor in the hospital who was an internal medicine doctor being like, I'm out of my depth, do you want to consult with the MI people here at the hospital? Are you having like, feelings or thoughts now? And I'm like no, I'm not having feelings or thoughts. I'm on meds. This is part of your job. [Laughter]. So all of that should change in the future. [Sips drink]. Anyway, that's when I stopped taking a bunch of my meds, and I realized that, you know, while I was definitely still schizoaffective, I now had tools. I had all these CBT tools that I had learned. I had all these dialectical behavioral therapy DBT skills that I could learn. And I also had a lot more like, tolerance for being low graze crazy. Um, so I put myself on St. John's Wart for mood, and I put myself on kava-kava instead of—I had, um, had a bit of a problem um, oh, one thing we didn't talk about—when I was in college, my senior year of high school I got surgery on my hand. Um, as a way to kind of like, reconnect with my body, and that's something that I had always wanted was a hand that was normal. Um, and I'm pretty sure that was my feeling like I needed gender affirmation surgery but didn't really know how to go about it at a young age, so I just projected it all onto this gimp hand that I was born with. Um, and I went through physical therapy and I got highly addicted to painkillers that summer, because I was on a lot of painkillers.

O'Brien: Wait, when was this?

Dance: This was senior year of high school, we glossed over it because, I'm sorry, I've had a very dramatic life, [Laughter]. So I got on painkillers senior year of high school to deal with all the pain I was with, with my hand. Um, and I got pretty addicted. And I went into that first year of college which was so transformative already pretty significantly addicted to painkillers and in withdrawal. So we didn't talk about that, it's probably relevant. Um, and that's, I guess that's probably why I smoked so much damn weed and drank so much damn alcohol in college which led right up to the crack in my brain. Um, anyway, back to the linear part of the story. Um, I had been on some dosing of Klonopin for MI stuff, and I substituted that out with kava-kava. Um, and I had been on anti-depressants for quite some time and I substituted them out with St. John's Wart, these were all tinctures and I did a fair amount of research, and um, there was actually one point in my life around this time where I thought I was going to go into, like, tincture medicine like professionally. Um, but that didn't pan out just because there's no way I was going back to school at this point. There wasn't any money. Um. It had been about three years since I had been in college, and there was first of all no way I was going back to that particular private college. Um, I was still living at my parents' house, and it was very obvious that I was well enough to have a life again, but not well enough to like necessarily go at it full-time. I didn't really know what to do, um, and so I did the thing that is probably least advisable by most people's accounts is I got really into BDSM. [Laughter]. Um. And that was really good. At this point um I had you know most of my marbles back in but I was recently coming off that trauma, and what was great about BDSM for me was it was these meet-ups, I could invent a whole new persona for myself, no one knew shit, it was expected everyone would be really nervous, and it was—what attracted to me about BDSM was it was, you know, this idea that nothing could happen unless you consented to it. And that was kind of my first exposure to the word consent at all in life. Um, and it was also, another thing people don't really talk about with MI, but I'm going to talk about it right now because I have to, like, sexuality is part of the human experience. And people have this idea that once someone goes crazy, you can never fuck them again. [Laughter]. Um, and where's all that sex going to go? Like, where on earth could it possibly go? Um, and how could I get any of it without necessarily meeting someone at a bar or wherever the fuck you're supposed to meet these people, and you know, have a normal experience? Because that wasn't going to happen for me because I'd been through way too much shit. Um, so, I did go through a string of slutting it up on OKCupid, and after that I was like wow, this is really bad sex, and horribly boring. This is just the worst sex anyone could have. This is just awful. I don't want any of this. Um. So I started going to like Munches in the BDSM community here in New York and I started going to play parties, and I got spanked for the first time and I was like wow, all this sexual energy, none of the bad sex. And the play parties I started going to, they weren't necessarily like—no one was fucking at them, not in the, I'm going to put my dick in someone's vag kind of way. Um, like most of the venues don't even allow for sex, which is to me like anyone touching anyone's genitals at this point, but it was just a really great way for me to be like oh, I'm going to exist sexually without doing sex, and totally get my rocks off in the mindset and get a lot of satisfaction and be like, intimate with people and be able to negotiate everything we're getting into beforehand, and no one knows I'm crazy or weird or different here because we're all fucking here because this is like, we're all, it's assumed that if you go you're weird and different. And that is like, wow, this is exactly what I

needed and not what anyone would ever recommend to anyone like me. This is amazing. [Laughter].

O'Brien: And what were the gender and sexual orientation dynamics of the BDSM scene you got involved in?

Dance: Um, it changed. At this point I was just coming back to being a person. And um what really helped me get through mental illness was not even approaching the question of gender. [Laughter]. So I remember when I first started going to [sniffles] BDSM stuff, I remember this pretty specifically because I can kind of track it as my FetLife profile changed, I started off going to these things as a submissive woman, and that changed into switch woman, and that changed into switch femme, and that changed into like, genderfluid switch, and that changed into like, genderfluid switch, these are my hard limits, these are my pronouns, and that changed into I am one of the organizers for a like queer, consent-oriented BDSM play party. Um, and it really—I'm going to do that whole linear skipping around thing, I'm so sorry. Um, I should mention it is impossible to talk about being trans without talking about it, um, right when I first started getting into BDSM stuff, I was hurled on a very, very different track for BDSM stuff, and that happened specifically because I was raped. Um, and if I had gotten into BDSM stuff and I hadn't been raped, I don't know how I would have identified. But after it happened, I was like wow, okay, one option is to stop doing this BDSM shit, because the rape happened at a play party. Yes, before anyone asks, it was rape—I asked him to stop, he didn't stop. Like, I don't even want to get into the details of that, but a lot of people are like, oh, if you're at a play party, are you asking for it? And the answer is no, that's now how that works. You know. Being dragged into a bathroom, asking someone to stop, having them not stop, crying for someone to stop, having them not stop, begging someone to stop, having them not stop, that's still rape, I don't care where you are. Um, [clears throat]. So I was still fairly new to BDSM after the rape happened, and that got me into a very specific group of people because I started talking about my rape and it being part of this narrative of new—people new to BDSM who are AFAB doing, going to parties, and then getting raped by people who were party promoters or who were big in the BDSM scene, or being necessarily targeted for these rapes, um, or these assaults.

O'Brien: Could you say what AFAB is?

Dance: Oh, assigned female at birth. Um, people who have vaginas for the most part is what that term means. People who are—have grown up to and have been conditioned within, you know, people identifying them as women. Um, so the people who I became very close to at this time were people who like myself were really into BDSM and who were, you know really pissed about trying to experience BDSM which is all about, you know, doing—well in theory doing stuff consensually that could be abusive, and then being abused. And that set me on a very different course because I was talking to a lot of people who identified as trans who had the same experience, and I was talking to a lot of people about like, hey, like, you know, it's almost like we exist within rape culture, and that was the first time I'd heard about like what rape culture was, and it got me near a lot of the most radical people who were doing BDSM at the time. Um, and there was for a hot second something called the New York City Consent Working Group, and I

was a part of that, um, and I started DMing a lot more, which is being a Dungeon Monitor at play parties, which is the person who makes sure that the rules are available and enforced, and the better the rules are at a party, the more the rules are enforced easily, and the more comfortable people feel like they can go to a DM., in general the less rapey that party tends to be.

O'Brien: What were some of the major parties at this point in New York that you were—?

Dance: Um, well, this was at a time when—one of the many times—that um, New York City Fetish Tribe was being called out for being a rapey environment. And it still is, don't go there. Um, I had been involved with the Eulenspiegel Society somewhat. There were a few panels of them being like, consent and BDSM, let's talk about it. And I have a lot of mixed feelings about TES. Um, then there were things—

O'Brien: TES being the Eulenspiegel Society?

Dance: Yes. Sorry, sorry, it's all jargon. [Laughter].

O'Brien: Yeah.

Dance: Um, there was also Mythical Events, which are kind of the least rapey party I could think of.

O'Brien: Mythical Events?

Dance: Yup. And um, and I started going to NYCTNG parties, which was a huge part of like, where I went to go play with people, and that's for people who are in-between 18 and 35, and I would go to the Munches, and I would go to the events.

O'Brien: TNG?

Dance: Yeah, it's um, basically every major city you can think of will have a TNG organization in it for the most part.

O'Brien: What does that stand for?

Dance: It stands for The Next Generation. Um, excuse me. TESTNG was one of the first two TNGs to ever exist, which was a sort of, TES is an extremely hierarchical organization and there are all these little sub-organizations within it, so there's all these branches, you know, and there's one specifically for women tops or femme tops who have submissive bottoms, there's one specifically for people who are into master and slave relationships. There are people—there's a specific branch just for people who are like, into doing tea service, which is when a submissive will, you know, hand tea around in a ritual type manner, um, similar to the Center, but very, very different. And um, for those who don't necessarily know very much BDSM history because how the fuck would you unless you were into it, um, TESTNG was one of two, there was also one somewhere

else that I'm forgetting the name of, I know more about the one in New York. Someone called Hightower and someone called Boymeat started the first TNG with TES, and TES has been around for like, 40+ years as like, "a support group for people who do BDSM." And I was very, like, used to support groups at that point with the whole mental illness thing so it was a pretty good transition into BDSM world, um, and um, now there are TNGs all over the place, and they all act independently. Um, I also got involved with the New York City Rope Bomb kind of thing, which is where everyone would like, pick a meeting place, bring their rope, tie people to, like, you know, fixtures within public parks, take a picture, get them down, and then post those pictures on the internet. And you know, like a dance bomb kind of a thing, where all of the sudden everyone on the street is dancing? This is like that, but with bondage suspension. Or, not suspension necessarily, but those were the pictures that were the most famous is someone like, hanging suspended off a lamp post. Um, and that was fun. Um, and you know, I got into bondage, I got into BDSM. I started teaching at BDSM workshops because you know, I was very into like, sadistic massage, and people started coming to me specifically to be like, show me your ways, and I was like, sure. Um, that—

O'Brien: So you were in your early mid-20s at this point?

Dance: Um, yeah, and it hit kind of a breaking point, um, I had moved out of my parents' house and I was living with two people that I met through the kink scene. Um, one of them was trans and one of them wasn't. And I—it was the three of us living in Bushwick. I was getting um, I was, you know, legally disabled from the whole mental health thing, and I was paying part of my rent through that check, and I was also working for minimum wage.

O'Brien: So you were getting SSI at that time?

Dance: I was getting SSI. Um, for part of that. Um, it started off, financially, let's see, let me try and give you the best breakdown of financially what was happening with me in real life. I was on SSI. I had been taking some classes at LaGuardia Community College. Um, I stopped doing that once I decided to move out of my parents' house because I felt like I couldn't like grow anymore, and I was kind of being tied there and my life was taking me in this weird, new, kinky direction, and that was the most like a person I had ever felt since this whole breakdown, so I just had to keep doing that. Um, and at that point I was identifying as femme non-binary, um, and I started calling myself by a different name than my birthname, and that's the name that everyone in the scene, in the BDSM scene, knew me as, was Stella, and that was, you know, who I was devoting more and more time and resources to being more at the time. I had my dog, I took my dog with me. There was no way I was leaving Remy behind. And he was three years old at that point, and I was, you know, I made SSI and I was working for minimum wage, and I had to be careful not to earn too much money because then the SSI would kick out, uh, which is a weird place to be, [Laughter].

O'Brien: What kind of work were you doing?

Dance: Uh, I was working at a Biscuits and Bass as a dog handler for minimum wage, which is the lowest position at that place. And I, um, which is basically like a—have you ever—you know in New York City public parks there are these dog parks and people go and they let their dog off the leash and they all paly in theory? Um, well most places that have the service of doggie daycare, what those basically are is you pay someone, and the dog is in one of those environments. Or in a kennel depending on, you know, how the dog takes to being outside in the off-leash environment. Um, and I had trained Remy myself and I was very, very good with dogs, and um, I was very, very good at breaking up dog fights, but more than anything preventing them from happening in the first place by being able to read a dog's behavior, and, that is a skill that I still have. Um, I got out of that job when I saw the owner of the company smack an employee on her butt with a clipboard, and I was like, I'm not working for you anymore, that's gross. Um, I don't care if you meant it as a joke, like, don't do it. That's horrible. And I quit that job in a fury. And then I was a cater waiter. Um, one of my roommates hooked me up with a cater waiter job, and the cater waiter job I was making significantly more but it was gig by gig. It was intended for actors. I was dressing extremely femininely those days, because that's what went hand in hand with being a cater waiter was passing as a very attractive woman, uh, because I was surrounded by actors, because those are the people they want being cater waiters are apparent—cater waiting, that's a whole world of classism and possibility that like, people who have never done it will never know, because it is expected for you to service high society for you to be very, very privileged for some reason, because the classier the catering service, the more privilege the people serving you need to have. It's weird. It's very weird, it's very racist, it's very classist, and I was kind of a crash course in, you know, intersectionality in a working class environment for me, because I was part of like, this one cater waiter service, but they also were like, the least classy of the cater waiter services, and other cater waiter services would have us fill in their blank spots if they didn't get enough people at a specific event. So we worked with a different catering service, and people from other catering services were mostly actors, and they would all look down at us, and we were people who were mostly not actors just being like, I'm just here to fucking work. And we had a much higher amount of people who weren't like, standardly beautiful. We weren't actors. We were just here to work. um, there were more people of color, there were more people with kids, there were more people with families, there was less privilege, there was less education, and we were being looked down on by these primarily white but all extremely beautiful people who had more privilege or who were a lot prettier. It was one or the other, if not both. Um, and you know, but also, people who were part of that other service all happened to be slightly more queer. But it was weird because they were still like looking down at us a lot? Like, I had never been scrutinized for being low class so much than at that job, because that—being a cater waiter is—that job is just like, classism 101 for anybody. If you want a crash course in classism, be a cater waiter for a month in New York City. Oh my god, [Laughter]. Like, someone like, turning up their nose at me because I asked them if they were done with their plate when they had like, clearly put their two silverwares together, and I just wasn't high class enough to notice that that was a, like, nonverbal way of letting the server know that I was done, but I asked them anyway because that's what we're supposed to do. Oh my gosh, I can't even. Anyway. I got out of that job, um, what was I doing at that point? After I got out of that job, I went into a time of working quite a few jobs. I remember, that was a time when I was doing professional tarot card readings for people as a side gig, I was doing cater waitering as a side gig,

as is very common in the trans experience you kind of make money however you can. Um, I had tarot card reading on the side. I at some point also started, yeah, I started doing of all things, um, technology education with kids, which I was very good at, because it's the same as training dogs, [Laughter]. Just the toys are different. Um, I started—I was also a barista at a coffee shop, and it was the first time where my boss was trans, and that was a big draw for me. Um, I'm still friends with this person on Facebook, we were in the same age range, this person taught me how to make coffee, I was mostly baristaing by myself, that was my main gig for a long time. Um, and I was—at that point, half of my income was coming from barista service and half of my income was coming from doing after school classes, doing like, maker stuff. Um, which is um, and STEM education which is science, technology, engineering, mathematics stuff on a very low-grade level with elementary school kids which is basically like, arts and crafts and science. So we'd make, um, I would teach kids how to make catapults out of popsicle sticks, and we talked about force and we talked about mass, and we talked about um, how to make a tiny little terrarium out of a recycled water bottle, and that job was really, really great for me because it kind of let me know that I could be smart if I wanted to. Again, I didn't have to stay—it's that I—I was never going to get rich doing that, and you know, all my teachers were like wow you know all this science, so what do you do for your real job, you know, and I was like [muttering] this is my real job. [Laughter]. This is totally my real job. But I don't even know, to be honest it's still kind of a mystery how I lied my way into all that maker education stuff with kids because I don't have a college degree, [Laughter]. I was just really, really fucking good at it, and I got offered quite a few positions teaching full time with kids being like an elementary school teacher, and I had to be like, I can't fucking apply, I don't have a fucking degree. Like, I'm good at it, you're not going to hire me. And all my bosses being like, what do you mean you don't have a degree? And I'm like, you saw my resume when you hired me. This is not a surprise. And they were like being like, oh yeah, we thought that you were still in school. And I was like, well, I would if I could afford it. I think the lie I told everyone, which wasn't a lie, it was just a half-truth, I was doing independent studying for coding in my free time, which is actually a more realistic way to learn coding than doing it any other fucking way, and I'm still doing that on the side, it's just a long and hard road. Um, and I, yeah, education with kids. We also did a lot of me doing education with kids. That was, had nothing to do with science because if you work in a classroom you need to be able to do classroom management, and a lot of that for me was being like, hey white kids, stop being racist. Hey privileged kids, learn how to listen. Alright, we're all going to do a personal space check real quick. Everyone reach out their arms. Can you touch someone? Okay, that means you need to take a step back. And a lot of I think why this school kept hiring me, one school in particular, is they were like wow, that person is really, really good at classroom management, and I was like yeah, I wasn't about to tell a school like yeah, I have a background in consent education, but that's really what it was, [Laughter]. And also like, it was a weird thing because I had so much experience with dog training, and I had so much experience being a dungeon master with adults in a very different setting, and they're the same skills they're just in a completely different context. That's probably weird to hear. It's true though, I can't deny it. If you mix those two skills together you can teach kindergarten.

O'Brien: Excellent.

Dance: [Laughter].

O'Brien: So you were identifying as femme non-binary?

Dance: Not at the school—at the school everyone—

O'Brien: But for yourself?

Dance: At the school everyone called me my birthname, my legal name, and Ms., and that was a big deal for why I left was I couldn't not be called my legal name at that job. And I couldn't not—I never—there's a lot in-between um, how women teachers are supposed to act and how man teachers are supposed to act, and who children treat teachers who are men versus how children teachers who are women, and I remember the day when a kid called me Mr., and then all the other kids laughed at that kid, and then I was actually like, let's all sit down. Mr. isn't wrong, and you have my permission to call me Mr. Um, equally correct. And this got back to the school and the parents, and like, no one ever talked to me directly about it, but it was a very big deal, [Laughter]. Um, at that point I was dressing more masculinely or how I tend to think of it in terms of my gender evolution, I was non-binary femme for awhile, then I was non-binary genderfluid because I would, you know, strongly lean masc and then strongly lean femme for other days.

O'Brien: And what's masc?

Dance: Uh, masculine. Um, but at first it was very much about femme versus not femme. Like I couldn't even say the word masculine aloud. Um, and there were days when I was like, oh, I definitely do not—the last thing I want to do is be feminine right now. That's going to feel like a lie. And then there were definite days of me being like, I want to be the most feminine possible because that is how I will get what I want. Um, and it was always sort of framed around this femininity as a jumping point, and it took a really long time for me to start using words like masc for masculine or uh, I was identifying mostly as genderless those days, because I was just like, ugh, there's this whole box of transness that I don't want to open within myself, because it's going to be like Pandora when she opens it and all this shit is going to come out and I don't even want to deal with it, so I'm just not going to have a gender, I don't need a gender, and I don't need an appendix, it's just one of those things that I don't have to have. Um, so genderless, agender, um, those were big terms for me. Um, at that point I was, at the end of working at the school I went from working as a barista as my second side gig to working at Babeland as my second side gig. And there was about six months where I was working at Babeland as non-binary, um, agender.

O'Brien: How old were you at this point?

Dance: Um, what is time? Uh, 26? I'm 28 now and it was two years ago. Year and a half ago. I've been working at Babeland for one and a half years. Oh, and sometime in-between 23 and 24, the Social Security income cut out, because they decided that I was not disabled. And that's kind of when I scrambled to have more than one gig. Yeah. So that's pertinent.

O'Brien: So you went to work at Babeland in fall 2015? Yeah?

Dance: Yes. Also, at that point, um, I had, in-between—it was when I was still a barista, went from living at this apartment with two other people who I met in the kink scene, I started dating this guy, I'm still dating him, his name is John, um, and we started living together. And you know, he's a computer engineer and he pays for a lot of my life, and I'm pretty financially—I would have to make extremely big life changes for me to not—if I were to ever you know, not be with him. We pay equal rent right now but I pay over 50% of my income goes to rent and I think 15% of his income goes to rent, and he pays for a lot of the bills, and whenever we go one dates he pays for it for the most part, and he pays for a lot of my shit. Um, so that's pertinent probably, as having one person who is trans and one person who is not in any kind of relationship is like the very not planned but it won't work any other—you know, just like that financial relationship and how you go about that when one person is trans, therefore obviously poor. Um, linearly, yeah, and then I had to pick, because I couldn't keep doing the education job and doing the Babeland job, and I was working six days a week and I was working six days a week out of seven for about six months, um, and I dropped the education job because I couldn't be myself there.

O'Brien: And you mentioned before we started this interview that you're currently in a place of shifting around your gender identity?

Dance: That is correct! [Laughter].

O'Brien: Tell us about that.

Dance: Um, for people who are astrologically inclined, I'm 28 and my Saturn is returning, and everything that I have been talking about in this interview I am dealing with right now because Saturn returns are about, um, sort of synthesizing all the yous that have been into one you that can exist in the future. And I've been a bunch of different people. Um, Saturn returns are also about dealing with all the trauma that you've been pushing down and down and down. For me, within the last month I've kind of been doing a lot of crying because I realized that I—okay, it started really when Trump got elected, and then all this anti-trans shit, and I kept on being like, oh, this is me, I feel personally attacked. And it started off with me yelling at everyone on Facebook for letting such a thing happen, and it ended up with me being like, oh, I, you know, I'm not just trans in the "I am non-binary" sense of the word I'm, like, in the position where I would transition given a certain set of circumstances, and I came face to face with the fact that that's always been a case. There's never been a time when I wouldn't transition in a heartbeat if it was possible. And I'm 28 now, and I'm coming face to face with the fact that if I don't, then I won't. And part of me feels a strong sense of duty to myself to do so. Because the more I think about it, the more I know that I've always needed to transition, and if there was, I've said for as long as I've been alive that if I could ever go into some magical mystery booth where you come out a different gender and everyone would just recognize you as that, I'd do it in a minute. I wouldn't even think about it. That has always been the case. I got a writing assignment from a teacher when I was in elementary school I remember, maybe it was middle school, and it was

supposed to help teach us about how not to be sociopaths, and it was like hey, what would you do if you woke up tomorrow and you were a different gender? And we read these out loud to the class and I remember all the other kids being like, oh, I would pee standing up and I would go to the store and I would dress in all these slutty clothing things, and my writing piece was all about like, how I was going to tell my dad. [Laughter]. And then I thought everyone's writing was going to be about like, how on earth they were going to tell their dad. But everyone else was just like, oh, I would wear a dress or I would fuck some bitches or I would do all this shit. And mine was just like, how on earth am I going to come out? And I was like, thanks for calling me out writing teacher, that was helpful. I wasn't ready. [Laughter]. Um, I also remember one of the only conversations I had with Joe at the magic shop was him being like, you're holding on to a secret, is it that you're a lesbian, and me being like, no, it's because I'm a boy. And I never even told—I didn't tell Joe that, I didn't tell Eric that. There've been all these times in my life where this question—I've given myself permission to explore the possibility of transness and during all those times I have distinctively pushed it back down into my bones because I wasn't ready yet. But I've been working at Babeland for quite a bit now, and I've kind of been stuck there, and I've been working—I worked with a therapist at Apicha, which is a specifically trans clinic, and the only place where I would go to get health care for quite a bit, and I come face to face with the fact that I have been chasing transness for most of my life. And haven't even been cognizant of it. I have worked with trans therapists, I have been hired by trans bosses, I have surrounded myself with trans people, and I have always done that on purpose. So within the last few weeks I have started to realize like, oh, there's a pattern here. I have been following the transness for most of my life, and there's literally always been something else going on. Whether it was the bullying or the moving to boarding school, you know, I get very, very jealous sometimes of people who are kids now who are coming out as trans and I'm like, you know, I wish that was me. Because when I was a kid, it wasn't a thing. It wasn't possible. Um, and realizing that like oh, you know, now is really the first time when I have the resources within myself to really kind of go on this journey and see where I end up. And it's still, you know, just as terrifying as ever. Um, you know, one of the major things I'm personally dealing with right now is like, what happens to my romantic relationship with a straight dude, [Laughter], if I transition. Literally the only time where I've felt like I have, you know, been romantically loved by someone who wasn't a, you know, I've had other relationships but they've always been toxic, they've always been garbage, they've always been like, you know, borderline abusive. Or just not possible because you know, when me and John met, I was coming off of rape trauma, and he has literally been the only person willing to help me deal with it. So you know, part of what I'm dealing with right now is like, how do I even contend with valuing myself, which is this strong urge to transition, versus this relationship which is the only thing I have ever wanted for myself, and the only thing I, you know, the only instance of me actually having it. So that's where, you know, I'm at right now. Um, and also Babeland unionized. [Laughter].

O'Brien: We can spend a little more on the gender stuff. We—it seems like there's a lot to say here.

Dance: There's a lot to say. I don't know how much of it I can necessarily talk about it right now because Stella was always a placeholder name. Because knew I wasn't my family name, and Stella

just doesn't fit that much anymore. So I'm kind of in-between two names for myself right now which is what I tend to think about when I'm feeling more confident. Um, a huge issue for me right now is you know, feeling like I can't leave working at Babeland because it is one of the only jobs that I can transition in on purpose, because I made it that way with the union. [Laughter].

O'Brien: Yeah.

Dance: And also feeling like I can't transition now because I shouldn't focus on it because I should really get myself out of poverty because I work at Babeland and it does not pay that much. Um, and I don't have health care, and that's a big problem for anyone, but especially people who have a history of tumors and mental illness and also who would like to transition ever. Um—

O'Brien: So it seems like there's the going from being agender or genderfluid to thinking about being trans is quite a big shift for you in some ways. What are the differences there that have such weight for you?

Dance: The first time I called myself trans I remember I was hanging out with a trans witch friend who was non-binary, assigned male at birth. And I called myself trans, and my friend was like, oh, this is the first time you've called yourself trans, do you want to unpack that? And I was like, yes, if I could transition I would. And my friend was like, that counts. That's real. Um, for me, the biggest change is realizing more and more that my relationship with femininity is not healthy, and what would make it healthier is feeling like I have to perform it all the time in order to be safe or to be someone other people want to be around. Um, the sort of shift that's happening within myself has a lot to do with realizing that I have been for quite some time pining after people seeing me not just as not a woman, but specifically as more masculine and treating me the way that they treat men and a lot of that work has to do with me also parsing out, is it the privilege I want or is it the masculinity in its non-toxic formats, and it's both. [Laughter]. Um, a lot of for me the work I need to do within myself is necessarily having to do with how much I show up for the struggles of trans women and how much I show up for people who are non-binary and assigned male at birth because a lot of that really teaches me a lot about myself. Um, why that's necessarily for my transformation and for my transition has to do with how am I going to interact with masculinity should I have it. How am I going to, if I'm losing my cis privilege and gaining male privilege, I need to necessarily explore my relationship to privilege, and also it is necessary for me to show up for people who are going to lose a fair amount of it by transitioning. And I need to understand that relationship a lot if I'm ever going to transition into a man that's not an asshole. I don't necessarily know a less succinct way to put it. Um, but it's been very, very important for me to show up for trans women in the workplace, show up for sex workers in the work place, show up for assigned male at birth people who are transitioning who are facing very different hardships than I am. Who are more unsafe due to their transition, um, and that is really, really helping me transition, um, and having a better relationship with both myself and specifically the me that's transitioning, because a huge problem I'm having is like, I don't want to be one of these gross dudes that we are surrounded by. Like, that can't be what I'm working towards. And the idea of transforming specifically to be more privileged is the most disgusting idea I can think of. Um, so a huge part of what I find myself doing more and more is just like,

passing the mic to trans women at my job. And that being like one of the only things giving me peace at night if I'm like, okay, I'm going to buy a button down shirt, [Laughter].

O'Brien: But it's a—masculinity is a part of you that deserves to be loved.

Dance: I didn't say I had it all figured out yet. [Laughter].

O'Brien: Yeah. I mean, I, being a good ally to trans women is awesome, you know, having a critical assessment of masculine privilege makes sense, but also gender are very precious parts of ourselves to be cared for.

Dance: Uh-huh. [Laughter]. Yeah. Um, I don't know if it came out as me feeling like, not loving of my gender. I don't know. I'm in a weird place. Like, more and more I know that Stella is just a name that is a placeholder, I know that I feel better about holding on to they pronouns right now. I don't really know what the end me is going to be.

O'Brien: Sure.

Dance: I don't necessarily—I don't have a clear vision for the me I want to turn into. And I don't necessarily know what this transition is going to look like. I've been trying to do baby steps. Um, uh, and also you know, as much as I can just putting off the serious talking with my straight boyfriend about it because in the best possible scenario we don't break out and he comes out as bisexual, and that's going to be a huge deal. And extremely painful and uncomfortable for both of us, so I don't know what's going to happen. Um. Yeah.

O'Brien: So we started this interview imagining that we would talk—or I, you know, we approach this, uh, to talk about the unionization at Babeland, but it seems like this is a, uh, really crucial story for you to tell about yourself, what you've shared, and I think making the space for it and acknowledging it is very, very powerful and very worthwhile, and that it's uh, it's okay if we don't talk about the struggle at Babeland. Um.

Dance: I don't know how much time we have—we have no time. I will say that it has been necessary for me to, in terms of when I think about why I stayed at Babeland, I think about the union. When I think about why I am a part of Babeland to begin with, I think about the union. When I think about—I don't know if it would have been possible for me to even start thinking about transitioning without the union.

O'Brien: Wow.

Dance: I don't think I—

O'Brien: How does the union help you be able to think about transitioning?

Dance: Well, I have written many angry e-mails about people using my pronouns, and I didn't realize it was so important. I have gotten into huge discussion about why people need to acknowledge that trans women get harassed at a much higher rate at our job. And I didn't realize why that was so important to me, and I was like oh, it's because I am also trans and I can empathize. I—and my role with the union has been you know, I've been trying as hard as I can to just make sure the pass the mic to trans women and be there for trans women and you know, as well as other co-workers who are trans, but you know, trans people were really the driving force for much of the unionization, along with people of color, and there's been a lot of solidarity there. And going into the unionizing process as, you know, non-binary, extremely passing femme, and coming out of the unionizing process being like, okay, here's the changes I want to see in the trans community, here's the changes I want to see in the feminist straight cis community, and I know all these things and I've been yelling about transness for awhile now, and I'm getting the idea it's because I live here. Um.

O'Brien: You mentioned that um, developing solidarity between trans people and people of color?

Dance: Yes.

O'Brien: Presumably white trans people and people of color, or?

Dance: One of the people who was most adamant about the union was a trans person of color, um, and that was even before I was involved with the union. Um, in terms of workers who have been more down with the union versus less down with the union, it has really boiled down to how much privilege you have, and if you have more privilege, um, actually I don't know if that's fair. With my co-workers who are white, that is absolutely the case. With my co-workers who are white, um, and who femininity has touched in any way, that has been the case except for actually, I don't even know if that's the case. I was trying to keep it general, but I can't. the cis women at my job have been noticeably—the cis white women at my job have been noticeably worse about unionizing efforts compared to everyone else. That is actually the truth. I was trying to keep it broad but it wasn't working, because I was like, oh but this exception, oh but that exception, um, and that isn't to say that all the cis white women at my job are horrible about it, but it's to say that every time we have necessarily—I've necessarily had to explain to someone, you know, hey, the union, not a bad thing, here's why, within my job working at specifically one of the retail locations, um, I've been able to talk to all of the women of color, I've been able to talk with and they will at least hold the idea, but all the cis white women interview had this discussion with just scream the fuck over me, and if I talk to them about it, I've gotten into conversations where people are like, oh, you're toxic masculinitying me over my existence, and I just want to, you know, just hide um, from this unionizing thing because it's too much emotional labor or some such thing, and I'm just like, alright, I'm going to leave you alone.

O'Brien: What do you think explains that discrepancy in support for the union?

Dance: Um, a lot of it has to do with location. Um, I work in one of the Manhattan locations. People who don't have a very different experience, a lot of it has to do store by store. People that work on the Lower East Side deal with drunken dude bros more, I deal with more like, ritzy entitled people and people in Brooklyn deal with stroller moms. Those are three very different experiences. There was a lot of solidarity between people who work at Mercer and people who work at the Lower East Side location because we both get a lot of entitled people. Um, now people of color have been a strong driving force for the union because there is a lot of really rampant racism. Um, in terms of the Lower East Side location, that's where people with the least amount of privilege tend to end up working. Mercer is significantly whitewashed. Um—

O'Brien: So this is interesting. I mean, it might be obvious to some, but I think it doesn't show up a lot in how people think about unions, so this discrepancy in privilege between the employee, the worker, and the customer as having a big—people wanting to address that through the union, so racist harassment or—

Dance: Racist—

O'Brien: Or gender harassment.

Dance: Harassment, gender harassment, sexual harassment—

O'Brien: And the union becomes a means of responding to that?

Dance: One of the major things that we were asking for in our contract, and I went to about, I'm going to say a third to half of the contract negotiations as opposed to the two trans women employees that showed up to literally every single one and made sure it got done, and we are in their debt forever, um, a big part of it had to do with safety training and how do we deal with harassing customers, and hey, we should have an incident report for when we need to deal with harassing customers, and oh hey, a harassing customer went so far to as to write a harassing Yelp review about me to try and get me fired. Hey management, when you read this Yelp review, maybe don't yell at me about how I mistreated a customer who was treating me in a bad way, maybe don't do that, that would be great.

O'Brien: So the employer siding with the customers in antagonism of the workers, and the workers using the union to try to push back from that?

Dance: Yes. And um, yeah. So there was um, a lot of it had to do with making the workplace safer, both when it came to making sure there were enough people on the floor, making sure there were protocols for what to do when customers do harass us, um, being able to close the store has continued to be a really, really big deal, because if someone is like, harassing someone, asking that customer to leave continues to be a very big deal, or being like, we're leaving because we're closing the store for a few minutes, that tends to also be a really big deal. Um, within the contract there was a point in negotiation where we were talking about latenesses and what latenesses could be allowed. Um, and it came to a point in negotiation where we traded a fair amount of

different circumstances of latenesses like the MTA problems or personal emergencies for hey, I can't come to work right now on time because someone is making it unsafe for me to get on the train or go to work. And we decided it was more important for someone to be able to get to work safely than for someone to be late because they were unsafe going to work. And we traded in all of our ability to be late for any other reason, and the contract specifically because if someone can't come to work because they're not safe, then you can't fire them for that. Within the contract—I've had a police officer come into my fucking job and harass me. And I remember writing the incident report for that and being like, thank fucking God I have this union, because for a very, very long time, you know, and we, you know, part of the safety training that we got was like, oh, if a customer is harassing you, call the police. I'm like, great, there's a police officer harassing me, now what the fuck do I do? At least I can write an incident report so it can be cited during future, you know, contract negotiations and before the board of labor.

O'Brien: So these are problems that many queer people and people of color deal with broadly in retail.

Dance: Yes, being harassed, um, because of one's identity, is extremely common. Being harassed by the police is something that people of color, trans people, and sex workers all happen to share. I remember, oh, coming to work after the Trump election was so hard, because I was like, someone is going to come to my job and shoot me. [Laughter]. And that was really difficult. And um, some of the worst feelings I've had in terms of isolation have come from other queer people being like oh, but you work at Babeland, should be so much fun to work there, should be great, and I've just been like, mm-mmm. Hold that thought. Um, because I—and it's been very interesting since Thinx came out, having that whole big scandal. Thinx is period underwear and they've had a scandal because the self-proclaimed "SheEO" has been, you know, exploiting and harassing workers of color and trans workers. Um, and here's the thing. You know, there's capitalism over here, there's feminism over here, within feminism there's intersectionality, and if you're going to bring the two together you're not going to make very much money. And the closer, you know, those two bubbles and the bubble within the bubble exist within each other, there go your margins. Now there are sex toy stores that I hear do it better, like Smitten Kitten, you make maybe \$15 to \$17 an hour, you can get full-time, and in Minnesota, where that store is, you know, that is significantly higher than you know, \$14.50 in New York City where you're paying twice as much in rent.

O'Brien: So how much were people making before the union contract at Babeland, and what were the wages won in the contract?

Dance: So um, before the contract, we were struggling very much to get higher wages. We were also struggling to get um, different scheduling practices because there were people called pure fill-ins who didn't have any scheduled hours, but they were supposed to pick up shifts as they became available, whatever the fuck that means. Um, and we were also trying to get healthcare. And during contract negotiations, we traded a lot of the wages for things like hey, if you want full time, it's going to be much easier to get it.

O'Brien: Better hours, yeah.

Dance: You are going—if you are part-time you are going to get this amount of hours, unless you specifically request not to so that like, people can plan their finances. Um, schedules became a lot more set, and we have more people who are going to be full-time now. And we also have more people who are going to be getting health care now. Wages have gone up. There's going to be—oh, it's all leaving my brain now. There's going to be like, something—I don't even want to give you the wrong information. It does not equal up to that much per person. Roughly \$1 per hour in a few months.

O'Brien: So I have a little less than 10 minutes left.

Dance: Okay.

O'Brien: How would you like to finish up this interview?

Dance: Um, thanks for listening to my stories. I wish I could go back in time and like, talk to myself. Um.

O'Brien: What would you tell yourself?

Dance: I wish—there are a few things I wish I had started doing at a much younger age. One of them is playing Dungeons and Dragons. Um, another one of them is—

Other: Hi! Sorry.

Dance: I wish I could kind of go back and like, give myself permission to start being trans sooner. And we all wish that we could save ourselves the kind of heartache of, oh, don't go to that party because you will be raped, or similar such circumstances where we could avoid traumas. Um, but part of me just wishes I could fling, Like Trans Bodies Trans Lives back into the past so I could read it as a kid. I keep on coming back to this idea that I am the—we hear a lot of stories about trans kids committing suicide. It's really common. And I keep on coming back to this idea that I am that trans kid that lived. I am the trans kid that lived, and it's not because it was easy, because I've had a tumor, I've had mental illness, I, you know, it's been hard. And it's not just been hard all these things independently of each other. It's been hard because you know, all these things necessarily feed into each other. It is part of a larger pattern of trans people being sexually assaulted, trans people, you know, needing to push down things into their souls for so long that it makes them particularly vulnerable to whatever mental illness might run in their family, because with mental illness it's necessary to talk about vulnerability, and you know, being poor makes you more vulnerable, being trans makes you more vulnerable, having trauma in your life makes you more vulnerable, which hey, goes hand and hand with being trans and with being poor. Um, so I wish I could go back in time and just let myself know that it's going to be okay, and I just wish sometimes that I had more permission to not be a girl or to reject this kind of being a

girl expectation at a younger age. But I know that it just wasn't possible. Um, and you know, forgiving myself for what's not possible is going to be a big part of like, transitions to come.

O'Brien: What do you think your future self might say to yourself now?

Dance: Just my future self will probably be like, put an arm around my shoulder and be like, oh, it's never too late, I'm so glad you're dealing with this now and you're not just kind of like pushing it all back down into your guts again. And future me will probably also tell myself now like hey, if you break up with your partner it's going to suck but it's going to be fine. I don't know if that's going to happen, but it's a strong possibility. Future me will either, you know, be with someone different and be like hey, you will find love again, or future me is going to be like hey, you're going to be single forever, but it's fine. Future me will probably be very, very glad that I got to do this interview because it's probably part of my longer journey, and future me will probably be very, very glad that I decided to you know, put value in myself. And part of that will necessarily explore what this whole gender thing is about.

O'Brien: Thank you, Stella.

Dance: Yeah, thank you. Thanks, listeners.