NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ANDREA ABI-KARAM

Interviewer: Aoife Smith

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Transcribed by Elizabeth Lashar

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Aoife Smith: Okay. Hello my name is Aoife Smith and I will be having a conversation with Andrea Abi-Karam for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library community oral history project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is June 21st, 2019, and this is being recorded at Brooklyn Public Library. Hi!

Andrea Abi-Karam: Good morning.

Smith: I guess I'll start out. Can you tell me a bit about where you grew up, where you're from?

Abi-Karam: [laughter] Sure. As you know, I grew up in Connecticut—between Wilton, and then Ridgefield, and then Stanford—which is a very white suburb, suburban place. And I had this amazing group of friends in middle school that now all turned out to be like queer artist freaks, and because of my parents' divorce situation I moved to a different school district when I went to high school, and I moved to a very preppy, very normie school district, and none of my friends were freaks because there were no freaks. There were like two goths. They were cool. Um… yeah. So, very suburban I used to come into New York all the time to go to punk shows in Williamsburg before Williamsburg was a mall. And then I moved to Boston to do undergrad.

Smith: Cool. Why'd you go there?

Abi-Karam: I went to Boston University. To, like, I don't know… sibling , to annoy you, or something. Boston's very cold, and one of the most segregated cities in the United States, if you didn't know. Undergrads could walk around without encountering people of color for years, if they stayed in their geographic zone.

Smith: I did not know that. Yikes. Alright. Did you study poetry/do poetry in college? Start in college or earlier or—

Abi-Karam: I started writing poetry in, like, middle school. Actually, I really started—I won, when I was in elementary school, this creepy thing happened where I won a poetry contest for Memorial Day and then I had to read this poem I wrote about Memorial Day in front of the entire school at an assembly.

Smith: That is so weird because the exact same thing happened to me in fourth grade.

Abi-Karam: Really?

Smith: I vividly remember it, and I was really proud of myself at the time and now I think back to it, and I'm like—

Abi-Karam: So embarrassing. Now I write, like, anti-nationalist poetry, and that was the first time I did a reading. But no, I didn't study poetry in undergrad. I wrote poetry in notebooks and stuff, and then I wanted to be a fiction writer and then wrote a bunch of Faulkner inspired short stories.

And then, my first girlfriend ever kind of turned me on to poetry, and showed me Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath, and Maryanne Moore, and then I was like, okay. I'm a poet now. But, none of that had anything to do with what I was studying. I was pre-med, and I majored in biology with a specialization in neuroscience, and I did an english minor. Because BU is such a giant school and there isn't creative writing in undergrad, I got into, like, the one creative writing class my last semester—or my last year. So I took one creative writing class as an undergrad. And then I worked as an EMT for a year, in Boston… Which is really depressing and I found healthcare very depressing, and I was also doing organizing at the time. I hated being cold, and the queer community was really small, and it didn't feel like working in healthcare could like, change anything or make anything better, so I moved to Oakland and became a poet.

Smith: Warm! [laughter]

Abi-Karam: [laughter] Yeah.

Smith: So was your original plan to work in healthcare, since you majored in biology, and etc. etc.? All that fun stuff.

Abi-Karam: Yeah. I was like, I'm gonna be a doctor. I did all the pre-med requirements, I took the MCAT. And then I was like, actually, I don't want to do this at all.

Smith: Did you do any grad school?

Abi-Karam: I got an MFA in poetry, but I think I took three years off. I was just like—yeah, it was one year in Boston and then it was two years in the Bay Area.

Smith: How'd you end up moving to Oakland? What really helped with that?

Abi-Karam: I wanted to leave Boston very badly, and I was deciding between moving to New York, or New Orleans, or San Francisco/Oakland. And I had only been to the Bay Area one time, for like a week previous to that. And some of my friends did a kickstarter to do this music documentary project, and they had this whole month long tour drive across the country and interviewing musicians on the road, and I was like, what if I got in the car and then you, like, left me in California? And they were like, sure! And so I went on this, like… It was my first time driving across the country, first time touring, and meeting all kinds of people, and it was amazing, and I also felt this extreme jealousy of wanting—not wanting to document, but wanting to, like, be in a band, be performing. So, inspiring. And then they ended up leaving me at the Anarchist Bookfair in Seattle, and then I got a ride down to Oakland. Then I moved to—well, I got a ride to San Francisco, then I crashed at a friend's house in San Francisco for a month, and then got a job at a cafe, and then eventually found a place to live. So, I was on the road for all of August, and then I was crashing with friends for all of September, and then I moved into a place in October 2012.

Smith: I'm gonna lean back a bit to—you mentioned your middle school friends, and you said they were, like, really awesome friends, all ended up being queer, [inaudible]. Can you talk more about what those relationships were like, and the importance of them at a young age?

Abi-Karam: Sure. Well, you know how it is, there's social formations in middle school and high school. We were not like the cool kids, we were like, the alt, art/baby egg queers. We had a—like, a cute crew. I mean, everyone was like, into either acting, or band, or chorus, or martial arts. I was also in band and jazz band, my entire life.

Smith: You were a band kid!

Abi-Karam: I was a band kid, yeah.

Smith: What did you play?

Abi-Karam: I went through a lot of instruments. I played flute for a year and hated it, and then I switched to trumpet, and then I got bored with trumpet and I learned saxophone, then I played soprano and alto sax in jazz band and pit orchestra in high school.

Smith: I stand by the idea that the saxophone is a very gay instrument.

Abi-Karam: It's so gay.

Smith: I mean, I had a conversation with someone else and was like, every person I know that plays the sax is queer, and he was like, okay well not this person, and I was like, not that you know of. [laughter] I stand by it so—great. [laughter] So, when you were in middle school, had you realized that you were queer ?

Abi-Karam: No, I was kind of like a prude for a really long time. I think part of that was partially because when my dad got remarried, he married a Catholic Arab and I had grown up Greek Orthodox, which is also intense, but not in like, a very intense, enforced way. And I was forced to go to a Catholic class after school, but I would skip the class all the time. I was kind of at the age where I knew I could no longer be brainwashed—so there was that—and I think part of it was like, I'm not very religious, and also, when I switched to high school, I didn't have any models for queerness, and I knew that I was looking for something and I desperately wanted to get out of the suburbs and complained about the suburbs all the time. I came to New York all the time to go to punk shows. I mean, hindsight is 20/20 right? When I was in high school I did Day of Silence and was an ally at the GSA [Gay-Straight Alliance]. I was clearly a baby gay.

Smith: Can you tell a little bit more about your family?

Abi-Karam: Sure. My parents are divorced. My dad immigrated from Lebanon to go to college, my mom is from New York—they got divorced when I was pretty young. I lived half/half for a long time, and then I switched to living full time with my mom.

Smith: Any siblings?

Abi-Karam: Only child. Only child Leo, you know—

Smith: Alright [laughter]. And was religion pretty prominent when you were growing up?

Abi-Karam: Not really. My mom's not religious. But it was, you know, it was more cultural.

Smith: And what about religion now?

Abi-Karam: Um, queer collectivity?

Smith: Perfect. [laughter] So when did you go through a realization of your queerness and transness? Was it in college, or was it after college?

Abi-Karam: Queerness, like, end of high school and into college. I was bi for a while—that was boring. [laughter] I didn't come out as trans until I was 24, or maybe 25—2015. I went to Mills College for an MFA in poetry, and it's a women's college, but graduate level is coed. It was a totally different environment for me, it's like, a tiny liberal arts school, where at the beginning of each class it's like, what are your pronouns? Which was not a reality at BU [inaudible]. And then after my first year there—and it was also early 20s living in Oakland where there are so many queer elders, it's so intergenerational, there's suddenly this like, oh yeah, I can do anything.

Smith: Any particularly important queer elders?

Abi-Karam: Like, everyone—I don't know. Yeah, and then I came out as GQ [genderqueer], and switched my pronouns in 2015.

Smith: And that's when you were writing one of your books?

Abi-Karam: While I was writing my first book, yeah.
Smith: Okay. Can you talk about that?

Abi-Karam: Yeah! Well, I wrote my first book at Mills, it was my MFA thesis. It was edited and worked on before it became book form, but it was pretty much a finished project. And it's about the U.S. military's role in the war on terror, and how different interlocking systems of oppression reinforce each other. And there's many eyes, many voices, many subject positions. One is a U.S. female combat veteran who loses her memory because the signature injury of the war on terror are traumatic brain injuries, so they're like invisible injuries, in which you lose memory, and the ability to connect, and all these things become hard. And every war based on military technology has a different signature injury, so the war on terror is TBIs and blast injuries. Previous wars are like, dismemberment, for example. And so, the medical industrial complex responds to the injuries produced by various wars, and the way that the medical industrial complex responded

to TBIs was to give people basically Palm Pilots, so digital ways of keeping track of things—remembering peoples' names, remembering your schedule—so that's called the PDA, so there's this like, cyborg adaptation, and this struggle to adapt, or fuse, and there's a struggle between adaptation, and fusion, and reduction. And that narrative is threading along the cyborg trans narrative, which is my eye.

Smith: Can you say more about the narrative—the cyborg trans narrative?

Abi-Karam: Kind of like, the eroticization of body adapting and having wires in your body, and planning that all out. And lots of crosstalk between the different eyes, throughout the book.

Smith: Would you be comfortable talking about your own body journey and transitioning, and being visibly genderqueer—

Abi-Karam: Sure! Where do you want to start? [laughter]

Smith: Wherever. I did read one of your articles from a few years ago about avoiding commercialization—[laughter]

Abi-Karam: Oh my god. [laughter] That was a mood.

Smith: Start from recent people—whatever comes to mind first.

Abi-Karam: Okay. Well, like I said, I came out as QG, using my they/them pronouns, and I had been repressing the desire to get top surgery for a long time, and then I've suddenly like—people around me were getting top surgery, and I was extremely jealous, and I was like, okay, maybe I should deal with this. Instead of repress it, like, think about it, think about what I want to do, and figure it out. And once I made the decision to address it rather than ignore it all the time, I was like okay, I want to get top surgery immediately. And I went to in Dr. Garramone in Florida—who's amazing. And one of the reasons I wanted to go to him, other than that I wouldn't have to wait so long, was that he has lots of non-binary patients, and him and his staff can use they/them pronouns. So, that was great. I got top surgery at the end of March of 2016. It was amazing and I wish I caught it sooner. And then, as you read my article, I don't want to, I'm not like, I'm a trans man, and sometimes I present more masc, but I'm into like, I don't know, glicthing everyone's vision, and being glam, and so I'm into like, makeup, and I wouldn't call it drag or femme-ness, I would call it glam. So a non-gendered sparkly vibe. I was very, very sure about top surgery, and I was less sure about taking T, I take a low dose of T, and I was like maybe I'll just try it, and the low dose is working for me. That's kind of rambling. Follow up cues.

Smith: Oh yeah, I wanted to ask about when you got top surgery. I know a lot of trans people have to really jump through hoops and present that specific trans narrative. So when you did surgical procedures, did you find that?

Abi-Karam: I had to do a little bit of that. Not as much as what a lot of people go through, because I didn't get it covered by insurance. Garramone doesn't take insurance, although he might start. I had been a patient at Lyon-Martin, which is the queer/trans health clinic in San Francisco, then I had Medi-Cal, which only works in California. And I had to see a psychiatrist, so I had to go and be like, I want to get top surgery, and you have to get a medical professional to sign a piece of paper and be like, this person is sane and has wanted this for a long time. So I had to go and kind of front and be like, "I've been trans forever, I've wanted this since I was in middle school." Because I didn't want it to be hard, so I was like, I'll pretend to be a trans man for a day, sure. And so I had to do all that stuff and then they make you get bloodwork. And then I did a GoFundMe and took out a student loan [laughter] for Mills in my last semester. I was working as a bike taxi at the time so I also just worked and made a lot of cash really quickly. But yeah, it was expensive. Have not paid off my credit cards since 2016. But because I didn't go through insurance I went through less institutional hoops. And surgeons love to cut, so, you know, I sent him photos, and talked to him on the phone, and then got it on the calendar. [pause] And I wanted it to line up with my spring break but it was actually the week after my spring break, so I had spring break and did all my homework and went to Florida, took a week off of school, flew back, and went to class the next day.

Smith: So how was your recovery? [inaudible]

Abi-Karam: I mean, this is poetry school, my classes are like, an hour and a half [laughter]. It's not like I was welding or something.

Smith: I'd be such a baby, though. [inaudible]

Abi-Karam: I was definitely sleepy.

Smith: Wow. Timeline wise, after poetry school, were you in San Francisco, then poetry school?

Abi-Karam: I was only in San Francisco for a month. I was in Oakland, for six years. Timeline. So, I finished poetry school, and then went on a month long tour with my band Spraytan at the time. Went across the country, did a big month long tour. Then we came back, and I mean, just like finishing any big, intensive, durational project, I was like, "now what?" But I was working as a bike taxi, and playing shows, and doing readings. Then one of my friends from Boston was moving back to Tucson in the fall, and she was like, come stay with me, because I kind of wanted a break from Oakland. So I went and stayed with her and did a DIY residency, which is kind of where I started my second book. After I finished my first book I was like, I don't know how to write a poem anymore, because I was just doing this project that had all these new languages and all these particular things, and I was like, "I don't know how to write a poem that's one page long anymore." I was relearning kind of how I wanted to maintain my writing practice. And then I was in Tucson just hanging out and doing my DIY residency, and doing lots of interval time freewriting. The Ghost Ship fire happened while I was in Tucson. I lost a bunch of friends, and it was very intense, very sad, grief-heavy, creative time. I did a short poetry tour with another friend of mine from Oakland, from Tucson back to Oakland, and then we got into Oakland and immediately went

to a memorial. That was still 2016, winter. I was sad about the Ghost Ship fire, and there aren't that many art jobs in the Bay area. There aren't really that many poetry jobs in general, and so I was kind of struggling finding work in my field, and doing bike taxi. I was working for this queer press one day a week, Timeless, Infinite Light, which is this amazing queer poetry press collective. Then I started working for Nightboat Books with the managing editor who, used to live in Oakland one day a week. I was touring a lot, traveling for shows, performances. I went on the Sister Spit tour for two weeks in 2018, which was the first time it was an all queer POC formation, which was legendary. And that was the first time I really pushed my poetry practice into performance, more interdisciplinary realms. Then I got back from the Sister Spit tour and like the day after I got back my Nightboat colleague was like, "do you want to move to New York and work for Nightboat?" And I was like, "I'm walking to a show right now, sounds good, talk to you later." [laughter]

Smith: So that was an easy decision? Just moving to New York?

Abi-Karam: I had been thinking about it already, and I told him I was maybe thinking about applying to jobs in New York. I mean, I kinda felt like I wanted to work in my field and there were no jobs, and I was sick of being a bike taxi, basically. I wanted more queer Arab community, and I missed the seasons.

Smith: Yeah, I don't know how to do without seasons. Do you have a good queer Arab community here now?

Abi-Karam: Yeah, it's amazing. And I also am lucky, most of my friends from Boston moved to New York, so I already had a friend group here, and I had been coming to New York my entire life, so I already had friends here. It wasn't like when I moved to Oakland and knew one person.

Smith: Are there any specific community organizations or groups that you're a part of?

Abi-Karam: I do Black and Pink, which is a queer/trans prison abolition collective. I did that in the Bay area for years before I moved here, and the New York chapter is so active, it's so amazing. I do lots of collaborations around performance, and I'm working with Kay on the Trans Anthology Project.

Smith: I think I saw that. I was online stalking you, I'm sorry that's so creepy, but I think I saw something about that somewhere. Yeah, that's really creepy, I'm so sorry— [laughter]

Abi-Karam: It's fine. Maybe you noticed if you google me it says poet, which is new, since my book came out.

Smith: Yeah I did notice. I read some of your vengeance poetry, can you talk about vengeance poetry? It's interesting.

Abi-Karam: Oh yeah, I love vengeance poetry. [laughter] Yeah, definitely. I started off by trying to write about global capitalism and its effects, and it was very emotionally flat, and just kind of walking around through the city. And then I was like fuck it, I'm gonna write vengeance poems about all these bros that I've encountered in my life. And it's not exhaustive, unfortunately, but I just kind of stopped trying to write about huge things, about like an intimate entry point or something, and then I started writing vengeance poems about killing bros. It was extremely cathartic and fun. I was like, no one's gonna publish this, this is ridiculous, but so fun. And I was doing them at readings, and everyone was loving them. I made a zine called Kill Bro, Kill Cop, which is a section of my book that I made a bright neon yellow zine. It was part of this queer distro project called Chaos Queers. We had a table at zine fairs and stuff. That was how my book started, was from writing Kill Bro poems.

Smith: I liked those. Those are cool. Did you teach or direct a summer class or something, summer class at Barnard, on poetry?

Abi-Karam: I was a guest. I was an invited guest to teach a class about vengeance poetics to a class of high schoolers, which was amazing. I had taught workshops before, but of adults. It was amazing. Teens are so much more immediately like, I have this intense feeling about this thing or this bad experience interacting with a man, or whatever. They wrote amazing stuff. I kind of carried them through a timeline of the history of poetry alongside different social movements, and then asked them to make a timeline of their own lives and important moments in their formations as young writers. It was very cool.

Smith: Would you say more about the other workshops that you taught with adults, and how those came to be?

Abi-Karam: Yeah, I have a workshop curriculum called the Poetics of Terror that I teach, and have often taught just for friends. I taught at Casa Libre, which is a non-profit literary arts institution in Tucson, Arizona, which just announced that they were closing, sadly. But I taught there last summer, I taught at Barnard, and then just in community, less official settings. I mainly do that kind of thing, I'm not, like, a trained teacher. I got a full ride to Mills, so I wasn't allowed to TA—it's a weird thing. Which, now, I would love having more teaching experience than just workshop. But, my friend in Oakland and I started this reading series called Words of Resistance, which was an open floor poetry radical poetry night. We did it monthly for five years, and every night was a fundraiser for compesary money for incarcerated people, and some nights we would make $200, and most nights we would make $5. But that's poetry, right? So we hosted that in basements, and living rooms, and this DIY art space called Rock Paper Scissors, which is where we were the longest, in Oakland. The person who hosted us at Rock Paper Scissors was someone who died in the Ghost Ship fire at Aregel. Rock Paper Scissors has since lost their physical space, so they move around, because Oakland is rapidly gentrifying by the tech boom. But, that reading series was kind of my introduction to holding a room, and hosting a space, and being mindful of people's needs and how to facilitate the space. And we have rules, like no comedy [inaudible] open mics can be very punishing. I don't know if everyone's encountered a bad open mic, but when they're bad, they're really bad. So we tried to make it good, and it was really beautiful. It was a space for

people who weren't necessarily like, I am a poet, I am going to publish and do all these things and be a poet. It was people who were writing about being involved in social movements, or organizing, or queerness, friendship, whatever, racial politics. And they would come and be like, I've never read before, and they would do a reading, and it was like, amazing.

Smith: Awesome. I meant to ask, so obviously you're a poet. [laughter] So in New York, what different jobs are you working? I think I saw something about different presses or something, but what are you doing to support yourself financially apart from poetry? Or including poetry?

Abi-Karam: I work for Nightboat Books, I'm the director of publicity. I work there four days a week, Monday through Thursday. We do like, 18-24 books a year, and so I publicize all the books we do, which means setting up book launches, and what it really means is trying to get reviews of the books. Basically pitching people being like, this book is important for this reason and you should cover it, and then sending them a book and following up.

Smith: Cool. Do you like it? Is it something you enjoy?

Abi-Karam: Yeah! It's amazing. Nightboat does mostly queer books, lots of POC books. It's mostly poetry and some fiction translation. When I moved here, I kind of didn't know what I was doing. I was like, I don't know how to be a publicist, I was only working two days a week, remotely. Just kind of barely maintaining all the things that needed to happen for all the books that Nightboat does. But now I feel like I kind of know what I'm doing, it's been a little over a year, which is great. And now I have some editorial input, I've acquired some books. My first book that I acquired came out in April, so I'm invested.

Smith: Do you have any current poetry projects you're working on?

Abi-Karam: Oh my god, so many! And no time because I have a fucking job now. My summer homework is I need to finish my second book, which was accepted for the Les Figues contest last summer that Simone White judged, and they wanted to do it in 2019 and I was like, I have this oher book that's coming out and it's been delayed—so here's a fun story. Let me tell you a fun story. After Sister Spit tour I went with a friend of mine on their spring break to visit Tucson for a few days, which is like, a 13 hour drive. And the day we were driving back to Oakland we stopped by this salon we see and did a photoshoot. Then I realized it was April 2nd, and I was like, oh my god this contest I was planning to submit to is closing today, and I was like, can we stop somewhere so I can get wifi? So we went into a McDonald's parking lot, and I got my laptop sitting in my friend's car, and I was like, I kind of have a manuscript. So I had this manuscript, and it wasn't long enough and it didn't meet the page requirements to submit to the contest, so I literally threw a bunch of other stuff into it and invented a bunch of page breaks and was like, okay it's long enough. And I sent it in, and I was like, there's no way, this is a fucking mess. And it won, and I was like, oh my god this is really exciting and I was not expecting this, and also now I have to like, actually finish it. So I have had lots of editorial conversations with the editors, who are really great, and I want to rewrite the last three quarters of the book basically.

Smith: Exciting. Is there a central theme for that book, or a topic you're exploring? I don't know how to phrase that well, but does that make sense?

Abi-Karam: Yeah, a lot of it is post Ghost Ship grief, like manic queer fucking in public, and there's a section about Ana Mendieta. I don't know if you know her, but she's a film and earth artist who was pushed out of a window by her husband, Carl Andre, and killed, and Carl Andre is a famous artist, so everyone kind of just let him get away with it. Not that I believe in prisons or anything, but I believe in vengeance. So there's a long section about her. There was a show with the band PFA in 2017, and there was a bunch of her film works that I did a lot of response rating to. And then there's a section about doing letter writing to prisoners and about [inaudible]. The section that I have to work on this summer is, I want to connect all these things and write about queer public sex and temporary autonomous zones, which I have started doing in my performance practice and now I need to like, just fucking write it. That's my summer homework. I'm also working on a trashy punk romance novel, which is really fun. It's about touring and crushes and stuff like that. I also, inspired by Marwa Halal, who's an Egypitan-American poet, writing from—I didn't learn Arabic growing up, I knew a little bit when I was a kid—but writing poems in english from right to left, so works in translation.

Smith: Yeah, I think I saw a poem that was [inaudible]

Abi-Karam: Yeah, the Poem-a-Day poem. So those are all the things I'm working on. [laughter] And publicizing my first book, which is also a big job.

Smith: Sounds like a lot, but I'm really excited. So, do you use poetry as a way to deal with grief and any other hard emotions and stuff? What are other ways that you deal with that?

Abi-Karam: Friendship, community—my approach to poetry is it's like a type of journalism, like a way of distilling larger political problems and attempting to dismantle systems of oppression and approach some way of imagining queer utopia.

Smith: So definitely poetry as a form of activism.

Abi-Karam: I mean, I'm not convinced that I can change anything, but I think that it can be a discursive space for critique and attempts in rationing.

Smith: What about the performing, can you talk about that? Like performing your poetry?

Abi-Karam: Yeah! I'm a Leo, so I love performing, whether it's in bands or poetry. When I got invited to the Sister Spit tour, I was like oh my god I can't just read poems, like this is Sister Spit, I have to do something epic. And so I planned out this performance, and there were eight of us, and we all had seven or eight minutes every night, so not terribly long. I adapted this piece that is an intermingling of both Ghost Ship grief and antifa organizing simultaneously. That's about seven or eight minutes, and I cut up a bunch of pieces of silver mylear to about page size, so 8 ½ by 11 ish, and then I printed the poem on shipping labels, and then I stuck the shipping labels to

the silver mylear, and developed this whole performance called Absorption where, as I'm reading each page, it's about 12 pages, I use a medical stapler to staple the pages to myself. It's this visceral accumulation practice talking about trying to fight the rise of neofacism in the U.S. And we had a tech person on tour with us, so he had a projector, and it projected different, basically glitchy gifs, glitchy, disco-y gifs, at me while I'm reading, so it would get reflected onto the audience because of the silver mylear. So I went on tour and stapled myself every night for two weeks.

Smith: You stapled yourself or your clothes?

Abi-Karam: Like, myself, my skin. So I used a medical stapler, and I had all these tiny little scabs, and, also by the end of it, bruises. So that was the first time I really did a performance-oriented piece. And then I've been collaborating with this performance artist, art director, and we adapted part of my first book to basically setting up a cyborg OR scene where I have eight minutes of the book recorded and distorted of my voice that plays, and we do this whole untangling of an external being, which is part of the adaptation, and then they staple the wires to me. So in that piece I'm getting stapled by someone else, which allows for this space of [inaudible]. So I did that performance at a gay rave in Oakland, and at the Poetry Project, and at Flowers for all Occasions, and I'm going to keep versioning that performance for upcoming gigs. Are you, like, freaked out by the stapling?

Smith: No. I mean, imagining it happening seems kind of painful, but it's hardcore.

Abi-Karam: It's fun. And painful. [laughter]

Smith: [laughter] Fun time, you know? Music. You said you had a band, you were DJing last night. Do you still have the band? What's your relationship to music now?

Abi-Karam: I don't still have the band because I moved here, but I play guitar and I've played in a bunch of punk bands. My first band in Oakland was called Faceplant, it was a queer punk band, three piece, really fun. I also did vocals. I was in this queer hardcore band called DFW where I played guitar, wrote lyrics, and we traded off vocals. And then the band tour I was talking about earlier, Spraytan, is a queer slut rock band, it was three piece, I played guitar and we all switched off vocals. I was in a Hole cover band for Halloween a couple years ago, and I was in an Avril Lavigne cover band. [laughter] So much fun. I really am trying to start a band here, potentially called Gay Delay, with some friends of mine. We've been scheming for the last couple weeks. I love playing music. It's so much fun, and I love playing shows, and I love collaborating in music. It is a big time commitment, so I haven't been in a band in like, a year, and that's mostly because I was focusing on poetry and performance practice. But now I feel more established in those ways, so I can be in a band. It's literally so fun. My DJ name is DJ Dyke Drama, but I just use my laptop. I don't have any DJ technical skills, I just have lifelong music participation.

Smith: Where do you DJ? Queer spaces?

Abi-Karam: Usually I'm just happy if I'm hideaway. Or sometimes people will ask me to do a party, definitely queer parties. I try not to waste my time in straight spaces.

Smith: Yeah. I wanted to ask, so you did go to punk shows and stuff when you were in high school. How did you get involved in the punk scene?

Abi-Karam: I just went to shows in New York. Death by Audio, 285 Kent, and then I was part of the punk scene kind of in Boston, but it was so fucking bro-y. It was like, I'm a punk, but this is not my scene. But queer punk in the Bay Area is legendary. Everyone has a queer punk band, or a queer dark wave band, or is a queer DJ, or is in a queer noise solo project. It's amazing how many queers and how much music is happening there. Yeah, it's amazing.

Smith: I feel like I'm forgetting my questions, I'm so sorry.

Abi-Karam: I will say one last thing about that. One thing I find hard about New York is that there aren't that many queer only spaces. It's a lot of like, everything is a queer space, but like, not really. In the Bay there are queer spaces, which is very important and amazing. Something I miss.

Smith: Any particular ones, or names you remember, were popular, or you particularly liked or frequented?

Abi-Karam: The Stud. It's a bar in Somo which is the the leather district. It was a bar forever, and then they almost lost their lease, then they co-operatized, so now they're like, 18% co-op, and it's a queer bar and they have performances, and shows, and dance parties.

Smith: That's fun. Another thing I was thinking about was your relationship to prison abolition work. I did see another article that you wrote about that, and the treatment of incarcerated people in California. So, anything you want to say to that?

Abi-Karam: Yeah, it's something I've been doing consistently for many years. I've been in Black and Pink the longest. I was part of CCWP for a while, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, based in San Francisco, started by Diana Block. Also other iterations of more DIY things, like punk letter writing nights. Words of Resistance fundraised for compesary money, I've done lots of court support, letter writing, teaching people how to letter write. When I moved here, I went to Books through Bars a few times, which I don't know if you've ever been, but it's cool. You go to this bookstore that's in a basement, and people write in with books or topics that they want books on, and you try to find a book that they might like. It's a used bookstore, so the selection isn't vast, but you try to find something they might like. And other things that I won't talk about on the record.

Smith: That's okay. [laughter]

Abi-Karam: It's important, prison abolition.

Smith: Agreed. I wanted to ask you about your tattoos, [laughter] and not specifically like, what does this tattoo mean?

Abi-Karam: Well this one says T for T. [laughter]

Smith: No, moreso about like, when you're getting tattoos done and stuff. Do you go to queer/trans artists, and artists of color, and stuff like that? I know a lot of queer and trans people do stuff. I don't know, that's something I'm interested in.

Abi-Karam: Yeah, most of my tattoos are done by my friends, because everyone is a queer tattoo artist in the Bay Area, which is amazing. And I love stick and pokes, which are from friends. I only have a couple of shop tattoos, and those are my Friday the 13th tattoos. Still, done by queers, except for one I think, which was an on tour moment. I feel very lucky to have had so many friends who are amazing visual artists and adapted that to like, shapeshifting people's bodies. I love tattoos, I want more. And I also love getting tattooed. It's very erotic, but not in a creepy way. Not at the artist, but as a visceral experience. I got my collarbone tattoed and then my entire sternum was vibrating very intensely, it was amazing.

Smith: I guess I could ask more about New York and how your experiences in New York have been as a trans/queer person of color. Just existing in this space, overall positive? What are some of your favorite things about New York and some of your least favorite things about New York? Kind of a big question, sorry.

Abi-Karam: Sure! Okay. I love that everything is awake all the time. I love that you can take the subway, despite its quirks, anywhere at anytime. Public transportation and infrastructure for public transportation is amazing. In the Bay, BARTs just don't work at night. So people had to rely on cars or Ubers or whatever, or walking. And I mean, being able to take public transportation any time feels also partially like a good defensive thing. I love the weather honestly. It's so dramatic. I mean, I like seasons, and momentum, and adrenaline, and changing periods, intensity. I think the thing that feels hard about New York is that it is so hyper-capitalist in ways that I'm not used to, or something. And also with the fall of so many DIY spaces, like Silent Bar, [inaudible] 295 Kent, and millions of other DIY spaces that have been forced to close either by rent, or the city, or the police. It's like, if you go to parties or shows, bathrooms are monitored. I went to a queer party a few weeks ago and there was a cis man monitoring the bathroom, and I was like, I cannot fucking stand that, and also like, why are you policing the bathroom? If someone's gonna do coke in the bathroom, it's fine. Let them do coke in the bathroom! [laughter] Then they do the thing where it's like, oh, you can go to the urinal, or they point you in a direction. And it's like, actually fuck off, I'm gonna go where I want to go, and it's assuming about gender and presentation. So I hate that a lot, and I've encountered that at lots of parties. I don't know if you ever go to PAT at Union Pool, but they do that there, they do it at Market Hotel, so I hate that. It's complicated. In some ways I appreciate that everyone takes their art so seriously, and that people are able to professionalize and make money for themselves doing art. In some ways I appreciate that, but also I feel like it means there's less free stuff or people are less down to just do things because they want to. They're trying to like, oh how will this fit into my career path?

Another thing I miss, or that is missing from here, is that since everyone's apartments are so small, there's less house hangs, which involves not spending money and not participating in capitalism.

Smith: One of your vengeance poems about the cop, can you tell me about that interaction that happened?

Abi-Karam: Sure. I was part of a protest in 2012, and I ended up getting arrested and spending a week in jail. It was a mass arrest, but it was, like, 19 people, it wasn't 400 people. I was inexperienced.

Smith: What about your interaction with law enforcement and stuff in New York?

Abi-Karam: This is interesting because in California, all the cops are in cars, and here, they're all on the street, like on the street corner, and it's extremely creepy. It does feel very hyper-surveilled, and I'm more hesitant to do punk things because it feels hard to get away with. Also they're assholes. I'm a biker, and they're fucking assholes to bikers. They'll just roll up on you and flash their lights and honk, and then run the red light, literally just to freak you out. Yeah, I feel like it is a real different space to occupy being on the street all the time, and the subway. And then because they're on the street or in the subway people will like, talk to them. Don't talk to them. Like, what are you doing? Don't talk to them. [laughter]

Smith: Overall, do you feel safe in New York, just walking around doing whatever? Is there an element of unsafety?

Abi-Karam: That's a complex question. I mean, I'm a hyper aware person, and I carry pepper spray, and I'm very vigilant with my surroundings. I feel like I don't get street harassed anymore, or as much, because I present more masc, more gender queer. But people around me get street harassed all the time. Yell at them.

Smith: Is that hyper awareness something you learned growing up and that's always been present?

Abi-Karam: I think I learned it after having an intense law enforcement, going to jail for a few days, because you never know when a cop wants to fuck with you.

Smith: I'm going to switch to something a bit less heavy, if that's okay. First, is there anything else you want to add, or anything you want to discuss, or cover?

Abi-Karam: I have no idea who's going to listen to this, but I hope that more trans people are inspired to be on stage and demand space for their work. Make a difference.

Smith: Do you find it hard to have space and carve out a space for yourself as a trans poet?

Abi-Karam: I mean, I'm pretty aggressive.

Smith: As you should be!

Abi-Karam: And I'm aggressive because literary institutions aren't set up to support trans people of color, and so you have to yell at them. And I'm also aggressive because I don't want people to fucking misgender me when they write about my work, and it still happens. I had to send an email, like, two weeks ago yelling at someone. Yeah, it's so annoying.

Smith: It's really not that hard to like—[laughter]

Abi-Karam: It's really not that hard, I know. Yeah, I'll tell you the story. So I did this event, or was getting ready to do this event for Yama Punk, which is a punk queer Arab collective in Philly that hosts a weekend-long fest at the end of every summer. They started doing events on Thursday nights at Penn Museum, and someone did a very short interview with me and other people who were doing a Thursday night event, because I did one earlier this month, to write a preview for a Philly online newspaper about the event, to promote it. And then used my pronouns wrong, even though we had an explicit conversation about it, and it's in my bio, and it's deeply embedded in my work. I saw it, and was so mad, and email yelled at him, and then email yelled at the newspaper editors themselves. They fixed it, but. Then I was mad and awake, and I had to wake up really early the next day. Anyways. So, yeah, it does happen. That is part of why, aside from needing to demand space, you also have to make sure that people don't fuck up all the time. It's so annoying.

Smith: [inaudible] I just blank all the time. Well, I don't know what else to ask right now, but what's one thing you'd like to leave whoever will be listening to this?

Abi-Karam: Yeah! More trans people on stage, more Arab people on stage, more punks on stage, fire to the prisons!

Smith: Alright, thank you!

Abi-Karam: Thank you!