

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

PARIS MILANE

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Transcribed by Jamie Magyar

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Michelle O'Brien: Hi, this is Michelle O'Brien, and I will be having a conversation with Paris Milane 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 experience of trans-identifying people. It is June 22, 2017, and this is being recorded at 454 Lexington Avenue, in Brooklyn. Hello.

Paris Milane: Hello.

O'Brien: How are you doing today?

Milane: I'm doing great.

O'Brien: Yeah? Tell me about what you do here, about your work and what this place is.

Milane: So, I'm a case manager here at Housing Works, and this specific building, we help women who have a history—either a criminal history, or just homelessness in general. So, we give them housing, we give them extra support as needed. It's a great experience for me.

O'Brien: How long have you been working here?

Milane: Now it's been five years.

O'Brien: Wow.

Milane: Long time.

O'Brien: Have you been at this facility the whole time?

Milane: Strangely enough, no. I was here for two years, and then I went to another department for about two years, and then I came back this year. So it feels good to be home.

O'Brien: Excellent. And do you live far from here? Do you live in Brooklyn?

Milane: No, I live in the Bronx.

O'Brien: Oh, wow.

Milane: Yeah, so it's a trek, but it's—it's well worth it, and I have great coworkers, a great supervisor. Great residency.

O'Brien: Where did you grow up?

Milane: I grew up in Atlanta.

O'Brien: Tell me something about your childhood.

Milane: Where to begin? [laughter] I guess it was a pretty normal childhood. My mother's a single parent, so my father really wasn't there. He kind of resurfaced, I guess, when I was around 13 or 14. We don't really have the best relationship. I have brothers. Quite a number of brothers. That's just basically it.

O'Brien: What is your mom like?

Milane: What is she like? Huh. She's a great person. She's very sweet, kind, understanding about some things, not so much so the other things, I guess. Yeah, she's like, just a normal, regular woman.

O'Brien: And tell me about yourself when you were a kid. What—do you have a sense of what your personality was like?

Milane: Strong. Yeah. I always had a strong personality. Sometimes I have to tone it down, because it can be too strong for other people, and kind of like, off-putting, I guess. So.

O'Brien: What does "strong" mean?

Milane: Strong in the sense that I know what I like. I know basically like, what works for me, and I'm kind of stubborn about some things.

O'Brien: And what were your teenage years like for you?

Milane: My teenage years were interesting, also. So, I began to live my truth in my early years, and—strange story. I used to go to school, and there was a Mrs. Winner's on Memorial Drive and Herringston, like, close to my house, and on my way to school every day I would go to Mrs. Winner's, like, change in the bathroom, very like, Superman kind of thing, and go as me. When I would go to school, I would get caught. It was an assistant principal there named Mr. Prince. I hated him, like, I hated him, like if I had a machete, like—

O'Brien: He sounds like a supervillain. Mr. Prince.

Milane: Yeah, he was. Yeah, Mr. Prince. So, he would catch me and call my grandmother, and my grandmother would come get me, and I would be, you know, counter-dressed, and I would get suspended, until "Oh, you can come in the next day," and then I would do the same thing. And this would happen like, every single day. And my grandmother always kept this a secret. Well, eventually my mother found out. Yeah, that wasn't like—that wasn't pretty. So that caused like, this whole rift when I was like, maybe in 9th grade, so I had to be like 14, maybe.

O'Brien: What kind of clothes?

Milane: It was like, whatever I could get, really, at the time, because it wasn't like I really had an—like, I didn't have any financial income. So it was like, I would go to my cousin's house, be like, "Oh, Jennifer, you mind if I take this?" Or like, I had a friend who lived down the street named Shay. She'd be like, "Oh, you can have this," because it was too small. So it wasn't always like, the best quality of clothes, or like, the most well put-together outfits, but I mean, I felt more comfortable wearing that than I did wearing something else.

O'Brien: Yeah. What did your mom do to get by? How did she make went?

Milane: Well, she worked a number of jobs, actually, while she was in school.

O'Brien: She worked what?

Milane: A number of jobs. One job, she was like a greeter at a car dealership, I know, while she was in school. Another time she was like, working as a nurse, then she was a home health aide, at one point, over the weekends. She did a lot of stuff.

O'Brien: And you said she was in school?

Milane: Yeah, she was in school.

O'Brien: Was that for most of your years growing up?

Milane: Yeah, most of my years, she was in school.

O'Brien: And your brothers? Did they work while you were growing up, or what were their lives like?

Milane: No. Like, one of my brothers was like, eight or nine years younger than me, so like, he couldn't work. He's like, just now working now, basically. And my other brother, you know, we're the same age, so he didn't work either. Strangely enough, we're like complete opposites either, like, complete opposites too. My brother that's the same age as I am, we're like complete opposites.

O'Brien: How so?

Milane: He's more like, laid-back and kind of cautious, where I'm more, like, adventurous, and like, you know, hair to the wind.

O'Brien: And did you ever cross paths with other people living their truths when—I don't know what terms, but queer or trans people, when you were growing up?

Milane: Yeah, I did, actually. So, once my mother and I got into this like, huge argument because she couldn't find these red lace panties. And so she was like—woke me up in like the middle of the night. (Laughter) So crazy! She woke me up in the middle of the night, she's like "Oh, where are my red lace panties?" I'm like, "I have no idea," you know? She's like, "Oh, I know you have them," because she already knew I had been dressing up. So she was just like, fixated on the whole idea that I had took these panties. So she kicked me out of the house. So for like, three days, I was like, sleeping on the train. In Atlanta, there's the train that runs like, till midnight, and then it starts back up at five in the morning. So I was like, taking the train, whatever, and stuff. Remember, I was like fourteen at the time.

O'Brien: Fourteen.

Milane: Yeah. So like, one day this girl sits next to me, and she's like, "I know what you is." And I'm like, "What?" She's like, "I know what you is. I'm one, too." I'm like, "What?" And I come to find out, like, she was like, a trans woman also. She was a little older than I am. Like, she was maybe like, 23, 24 at the time? She took me in. Her name was Chantelle. Chantelle Powell. She took me in, and I stayed with her for literally maybe like two years. She got me on hormones, she made sure I went to school, and she would let me dress—in the house, I could dress as a girl, but then when I went out she was like, "Oh, you're not ready to dress," you know, yeah. And then when I reached a certain point she was like, "Okay, now you're ready to go out in public," so.

O'Brien: Tell me about her life. What was she like?

Milane: She was like—she was like, a great person. She kind of like, seemed to be like my big sister, like even when she ended up moving, because she had a boyfriend named Kevin. She ended up living with Kevin and stuff, and I ended up moving with them, you know? At that time, like, my name wasn't Paris then, it was Fee. So like, people who know me for like, years, they call me Fee. Because I wanted to change my name to Phoebe, but nobody liked this name.

O'Brien: Phoebe's a good name!

Milane: I know. I still like the name Phoebe, but no one liked it, so when I changed it, I changed it to Paris. But all my friends who've known me forever and a day, they call me Fee. Yeah, it's like, life is strange. Yeah, so, I moved in with her and Kevin and stuff, and like, she was like, my real sister, or like, an aunt, that was like, not too far older than I am.

O'Brien: Chantelle, you said her name is?

Milane: Chantelle.

O'Brien: And how did she and Kevin get by? What kind of—did they work, or?

Milane: I know Kevin worked at a grocery store, so he didn't really have like, the best financial means or anything. And he was much younger. He was—he was much younger. He had to be like, 21, 20-ish. Yeah. And she sold, so. You know. You use what you got.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: But we—we never like, we never—never like, lacked anything, I guess you could say? Like, you know, she always found a way to have food and stuff, you know? She was just a great person.

O'Brien: And was she a part of a trans community or scene in Atlanta at all?

Milane: No, no. She—Chantelle lived basically in stealth. Strangely enough, I like, discovered the trans scene from one of her friends who kept coming over. Was like, "Oh, you know, it's like other girls," and then I was like, "Really? Like, there's more of us?" You know? "We *do* exist." That kind of mentality. So that was like, very strange. I ended up meeting other girls. Like I met Dee Dee Chamblee, who ran LaGender. I don't know if you're familiar with it.

O'Brien: No.

Milane: It's like, a trans organization in Atlanta. Under—

O'Brien: LaGender?

Milane: LaGender, yeah. LaGender Incorporated. And I like, worked with Dee Dee and stuff, and then there was another woman there who branched off and started her own organization, too. And then like, they were kind of like, grooming me, because I was like, young. And like, they were just like, great models. So, that's how I was introduced to like, more girls. Being thrown into the scene.

O'Brien: And tell me some about this scene. Like, what—how big was it? What was it like? What were the people like? Like, demographically, and in terms of how people would hang out.

Milane: Well, demographically, the scene that I was familiar with were, majority black trans women, post-operative, yeah. Who didn't really have the financial means for like, surgery, but still dressed and loved their truth and stuff, nevertheless were completely happy in themselves. They had like, relationships, long-term relationships, which is kind of funny, because here in New York you don't find that as much, so. And there's like, a huge difference in culture. But there were also like, Caucasian trans women. Like, for example, one of the ladies, Jamie, we're still friends today. She like—Caucasian trans woman, she became like, a lawyer, and now she's like, cool as hell. Post-operative, [unintelligible] and yeah, I met her actually through, you know, the LaGender group.

O'Brien: Yeah?

Milane: She was a volunteer there.

O'Brien: And so this LaGender, Inc. is—is it like, a service organization or a political organization, or what do they do?

Milane: It's—it's a service kind of organization because they provide—well, they provided—I don't know what they do now. I know that they're still around, so I imagine they still—

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: —are in the same vein of things, but they provide like, support groups, and, you know, disclosure to family that you want to live your truth, they provided—help you with name changes and so forth.

O'Brien: This like, mutual support.

Milane: Yeah. They even like—I ended up working a part-time job at the AUC.

O'Brien: What's that?

Milane: Atlanta University Center. It's like, Morehouse [College], Morris Brown [College], and Clark [College]. Because they used to give panels and stuff, panel discussions regarding like, social issues and stuff. And I was like, super young. Super young. But like, Dee Dee was like, "Oh, this is what, you know, you're gonna do," so like, she like, groomed me for this. So I ended up getting a job there. And all that was facilitated through Dee Dee. Like, she made that connection to kind of educate the future years and stuff, the upcoming people, who were gonna become part of today's society. The working class, the—just, general society. Yeah.

O'Brien: That—were you—were there other young trans people in—being supported and cultivated in that community?

Milane: Not in LaGender. Mostly, the people were kind of, like, older.

O'Brien: Yeah?

Milane: Yeah. Like, I wouldn't consider them to be old now. (Laughter) Because they were like—they were like, you know, maybe like late 30's, to like, maybe like 50's and 60's. But they were like, just great overall.

O'Brien: And how old were—or, I'm sorry, what year was it when you moved in with Chantelle and...?

Milane: I moved in with Chantelle, I had to be like, you know, 14, 15. I was in there for like two years.

O'Brien: And what year was that?

Milane: Many years ago.

O'Brien: Okay. Was it the 90's, or the—

Milane: Yeah, it was—

O'Brien: —the 2000's?

Milane: —it was like, the 90's going into the 2000's, ish, yeah.

O'Brien: Okay, cool. And were—how long did you stay in school during that time, and when did you start working?

Milane: I stayed in school most of the time. I didn't like, start—in terms of “enough” like, I didn't—I didn't finish the school that I was going there, at the time. Like, my last year there was like, my senior year—like, and I dropped out from that. I had to go back to school later on.

O'Brien: When was that? When did you go back to school?

Milane: Much later on. It was like—I had to be like, 26. Yeah, so like, years later.

O'Brien: So, working at the AUC, connected to LaGender, Inc., living with Chantelle and Kevin, getting to sort of be connected to other people, mostly African American trans woman scene—did it overlap with the ball community, or was it more separate?

Milane: Yeah, I mean, that was—there were some times where—when I was involved in the ball scene, but that didn't really interest me as much.

O'Brien: What were the differences between people that were in that scene and folks who were not, and—like, what?

Milane: Okay, so. Hmm. In general, the ballroom scene and stuff is—it tends to have a different mentality. And I don't think it's the individual person. I think it's—because it has more to do with, like, because it's a mass. You know, certain primal instincts are intensified and stuff, and certain natural—certain things like that. So it's not like an individual person in the ballroom scene is really able to show their own personal personality. It's like, the group. And in the ballroom scene, because it's competitive, and it's really geared toward a look, instead of the essence of one being oneself, and the essence of one bettering their self, that takes away from

what it could actually do. I think that's why, for me, it caused a disconnect, and I really wasn't pleased being involved in that venue.

O'Brien: So you encountered it, and really had a sense that it was not—would not help you.

Milane: Yeah, like, "This isn't for me."

O'Brien: And was there a kind of clear community of other people that were not involved, or was it just a—some people were, some people weren't, and you all hung out together?

Milane: Mm. More so back in those days, it was like, you know, if you were, you were. If you weren't, you weren't, kind of thing. As I was getting older, I noticed that a lot of my friends became ballroom girls, and they've tended to gravitate toward each other. You know, there was like, a stark difference between the two. It's like, you know, we're sheep, and they're goats, and never shall the two meet, kind of thing. But now it's kind of like, back to a blend, because moving to New York, it seems like everyone's involved in the ballroom scene, strangely enough. And then you're like, "Oh, hey, you're in the ball, too! Like, yeah! Oh, I would've never imagined."

O'Brien: And what do you think they thought about you?

Milane: Ummm...

O'Brien: Were they the goats or the sheep? I missed that part. (Laughter)

Milane: I have no idea! (Laughter) I never try to figure out who's the goat and who's the sheep.

O'Brien: Okay! It's probably for the best.

Milane: I think it's for the best, too. Because if I do, then I probably would drive myself mad. But, yeah. I don't know what they thought of me. They probably thought the same thing, strangely enough. It's kind of funny, too, because when you look at something from your perspective, everything is colored in peach-like lenses and stuff, you know? And if someone else is looking, it may be lavender. So, you know, we all view life differently, we all see life how we want to see it, or how it suits us. So maybe for them, I was the goat. Who knows? Maybe not.

O'Brien: And in this—the people, the other trans people you knew in Atlanta, what were people's interface with, oh, social services and institutions, like were—I mean like, were there AIDS services that people were connected to, was there like, public housing? What did people—?

Milane: See, that's very strange, too. Because, okay, so, back then, when I was there—well, as far as like, AIDS services, like, I had a friend named Kevin who, I know he worked at like, AID Atlanta.

O'Brien: This is a different Kevin than Chantelle's partner?

Milane: Yes, this is a different Kevin. This is—I don't know Kevin's last name. I think it's like, Bearden? But this is a different Kevin. Yeah. This Kevin actually became [unintelligible]. Yeah. So, totally different Kevin. Yeah. But this Kevin, I knew worked at AID Atlanta, and like, he would go and, you know, give out literature, and just was like, you know, just cool—cool person. And I didn't really know anyone else that was like, "Oh, you know, there are AIDS services," or "There are services to help with housing," or "services for this," especially in the ballroom scene. They were like, more focused on, "Oh, you know, you should get the look. Save your money so you can get the implants," you know? "Oh, you need a nose," you know? That's kind of how it was. It was very superficial, in a way. And, you know, I hate to say this, but, you know, when you get old and you're like, 90, no one cares if you have perfect tits. No one cares.

O'Brien: Hopefully they'd care about more important things, right?

Milane: (Laughter) Yes! It's your conversation and your personality that's going to keep you, like, connected to your friends, your families, and your loved ones. It's not your perfect breast, your amazing ass, or, you know, your washboard stomach. So that would be nice, I imagine. At 90. Possibly so.

O'Brien: And what was the drug use like? What drugs were big? How common were they?

Milane: Oh. So, in my day it was cocaine, and it was ecstasy. Yeah.

O'Brien: And would, like, people spin out and like, disappear into jail or rehab or—

Milane: Oh, of course!

O'Brien: —would people mostly keep it, you know?

Milane: Well, I don't know about rehab. But jail, of course. Like prison, oh, hearing, "Your friends went to prison; you won't see them for, you know, two years, three years." That was kind of a normal thing. It was like, "Oh, you know, Coco got locked." "Oh, okay, so what are we going to do tonight?" You know? It was no big deal. It didn't even phase you. It's very strange. Rehab wasn't really a thing, you know? You told a girl she had a problem with substances, she was like, "Oh, okay." Grain of salt kind of thing.

O'Brien: Yeah. Were some people in recovery, or was that also not a thing?

Milane: If they were in recovery, it was like, them in recovery alone with no support or anything, because that wasn't something that really happened.

O'Brien: Yeah. Do you remember friends—good friends of yours getting locked up—

Milane: Oh, yeah.

O'Brien: —and that being hard?

Milane: Well, I wouldn't say it was hard. I couldn't say it was hard at all, because, you know, it became such a way of life that it was my normalcy, you know?

O'Brien: And how about how people in that—those communities got by. Like, in a lot of interviews people have talked about sex work. In others, people had jobs on the side that they managed to pull together. What was that landscape like?

Milane: Well, the majority of the people I knew didn't work jobs. It was sex work, forgery or identity theft—whichever way you want to look at it—smash and grabs, bank pulls, selling drugs—I knew quite a number of drug dealers in my day—yeah, and that was basically it.

O'Brien: And without naming names—

Milane: Well, of course.

O'Brien: —what's identity theft? Like, how did that work? How did people make money off of that?

Milane: Okay. So, identity theft usually went hand in hand with check fraud. So, you would pay “Billy,” you know, money for an ID. You would pay “Sarah” money also, for like, a book of checks that she printed out. And then you would go and you would just use them on someone's real account, I guess, to, you know. You would use them until you get like, the merchandise. And then you would take the merchandise back after the grace period and get it back in cash, or else if that account was closed at that point you would, you know, scratch and get ready for—you know, go back out again. That's kind of how it was a way of life.

O'Brien: Yeah. And what's a bank pull?

Milane: A bank pull... Oh, hang on, like you—you've never heard of these before?

O'Brien: Yeah, I don't know about them.

Milane: Oh, wow. You've lived a good life. (Laughter) So, a bank pull is like if I come to you and I say, “Okay, Michelle, like, I've got this check but I don't have an account. This check is for \$3000. I'll tell you what. If you put it in your account, I'll give you \$600 off the top, you know,

here you go.” And you’re like, “Okay, yeah, no worries!” So you take the check, you deposit it into your account and give me, you know, my portion, and keep six, because you’re a good friend so I’m of course paying you six. And then you find out later that this check was fraudulent, so therefore you have to pay back the whole thing. And if you don’t, you will be facing criminal charges. That’s a bank pull.

O’Brien: Yeah, and I know about people writing strangers over email to make that happen—

Milane: Yeah.

O’Brien: —but in this world, how would people find somebody to do that?

Milane: Strangely enough, like, people still do bank pulls today. And this is what I’m so surprised about. I’m like—cause I’ve been in plenty of cars where like, people are like, “Oh, we’re gonna meet this person, we’re pulling a bank pull,” and I’m like, (Sighs). But like, people are like, still doing it today. Like, I had a guy send a message to me on Facebook, and he was like, “Oh, you know, I got a checking account,” and I was like, “Won’t get me, sweetie.” You know? They were doing this when I was young. This isn’t anything new. So I’m surprised. I’m honestly like, in awe that people are still able to pull this off.

O’Brien: Well, apparently in the world of the internet it’s super common, right?

Milane: Yeah.

O’Brien: All sorts of scams along these lines.

Milane: Yeah, like it just reminds me of like, the fiddler scam.

O’Brien: Tell us about that.

Milane: This shows you like, the group of people who I hung with, growing up with. So like, the fiddler scam was like. Okay, so you own a restaurant. So this guy comes in and eats, and he has his fiddle—his violin. So he’s like, “Oh, I forgot my wallet, but I have a concert tonight. This is my only means of making money. If you don’t mind, I can let you hold my violin while I run to get my money from the hotel.” So you’re like, “Okay,” because you’re like, “He’s a musician. This is his only way of living,” yada yada. By chance, there’s a second person there, who’s another customer, who says, “Oh, you know, that instrument is a very rare instrument, yada yada. It costs this,” you know, “I can’t believe he left it with you. I have to go. I can’t believe it.” So by the time I come back, you’re like, “Oh, how much if I buy the instrument from you?” and you make a deal with me. And you pay me to buy the instrument, and you find out later on, you have a worthless violin. It’s like a two person con, fiddler scam. Like I am so surprised that these—that people still use the same cons from like, way back when.

O’Brien: When did you move to New York?

Milane: I moved to New York in 2011, September.

O'Brien: So you were in Atlanta for a while? Or did you go anywhere else first?

Milane: Oh, I mean, I went to like, other places. I went to Hoover, Alabama, which was right outside of Birmingham. I was there for like six months. Seemed like forever.

O'Brien: What brought you to Hoover?

Milane: I had a friend of mine whose mother had passed. And when his mother passed, he was kind of like, inconsolable. So I went and kept him company. Strangely enough though, like, I'd seen a lot of like—a lot of hot guys there in Birmingham, in Hoover. But like, when you told them you were trans they were like, "Oh, that means you like women, that's fine." I'm like, "Wait, what?"

O'Brien: And what brought you to New York?

Milane: I still haven't figured out what brought me to New York, exactly. It's just one of those things that happened. It's kind of like, organic. Strange, right? And at like, the time, I was divorced, so... I kind of needed a change of scenery, anyway.

O'Brien: Tell me about your marriage and divorce.

Milane: (Sigh) I was married to this guy. Like, yeah, I met him, he was hot. We got married all of a sudden anyway. And then we found out we had very, very different views on things. Very, very different ways of life, values... Like, he wasn't the guy for me. Aside from being like, physically attractive and stuff, and the physical connection, like, there wasn't really that much more.

O'Brien: What were some of your different moral views?

Milane: Okay. So I was raised that like, you have to earn everything you have. Even like, when I hung out with people who were like, doing scams, fraud, whatever, bank pulls, you know—they were earning, at least, their keep.

O'Brien: What's not earning?

Milane: Not earning is like, saying, "Oh, I'm just going to sit back and wait to see if this comes through from the government for me."

O'Brien: Oh, so like, services.

Milane: Yeah. And just being like, strictly reliant on that? To me, I think that like, shows like, a lack of ambition and, you know, determination to better one's life.

O'Brien: And were there—was public assistance adequate for anyone to do that?

Milane: No.

O'Brien: I'm thinking, this is after welfare reform in a southern state, like, I can't imagine public assistance was that generous.

Milane: No, definitely not. But that's—and that, like, to me, that makes the point even clearer. Like, you know, you can't sit back and wait on something when you can go and do something for yourself, you know? The cart's not going to move unless you push it. You know? That kind of thing.

O'Brien: And what was your husband's attitude?

Milane: He was like, "Oh, if we look at the cart long enough, eventually it's going to move. Someone has to have telepathy," you know? That kind of... No, it doesn't work like that! So, very crazy life.

O'Brien: So what was—so, when you first got to New—or, I'm sorry, before we get to New York, how—did you do other work after the university—were you doing clerical stuff at the university, or what was your job there?

Milane: Okay, so at first I was just doing the—like, I was like, on the panel, for like the gender issues.

O'Brien: The panel.

Milane: The panel, yeah. When LaGender would come over for like, the panel discussions, I was doing that. And then I ended up getting the job as a music library clerk.

O'Brien: So you would speak publicly on trans issues.

Milane: Yes. Well, LGBT issues in general.

O'Brien: Okay.

Milane: Like, I usually didn't disclose I was trans until like, the end of the conversation if that ever came up. Yeah. Because I didn't think it was like—I didn't think it was necessary to divulge at the beginning.

O'Brien: And how often would these panels happen?

Milane: Oh, they were like, quite frequent. Yeah.

O'Brien: So you were a public speaker.

Milane: I always just saw it as "panelist." But okay, that works, I guess! Yeah.

O'Brien: Yeah. How long did you do that for?

Milane: I did it for like, a year and a half, two?

O'Brien: And then after that?

Milane: And then after that, I became a music librarian.

O'Brien: A music librarian?

Milane: Yes.

O'Brien: What does that, like...?

Milane: Okay. So, at Morehouse, in Brawley Hall, there's like, the music department. And at the time, Dr. Alfred Duckett was there.

O'Brien: Who is that?

Milane: Dr. Alfred Duckett. He is—he's one of the professors, but he does the like, orchestra. So, like, a friend of a friend kind of thing. Like, he was friends with Miss Thompson, and Miss Thompson was my music teacher, so that she ended up getting me the job. So I was the music librarian at the college, in Brawley Hall, at Morehouse. So like, that's what I did, and because of that, I could take courses. So I would take courses even though I wasn't quite of age to take courses. And they were free. Yeah.

O'Brien: So you had a job at the library, the music library. How long did you do that for?

Milane: I did that for like, maybe like two years?

O'Brien: So, you mentioned that in this scene of other trans women, almost nobody had a job. But you were able to get jobs, or this job, at least.

Milane: Yeah, I had a job.

O'Brien: That's great. And after that?

Milane: I engaged in sex work, like everyone else. (Laughter) Yeah, it was like, you know, I was seeing how much money everyone else was making, and it was... Yeah, it was like, big fish, little fish. So.

O'Brien: And what would you like to tell us about working in sex work?

Milane: Sometimes it can be tasking. Yeah. I mean, I did that for a while and stuff. Naturally, everything wasn't for me. Even though I had like, regulars, and I treated everyone else humanely, and like, they kind of liked my personality because I'm quirky and strange—yes, I've just admitted I'm quirky and strange—but everything wasn't for me, because I don't really like getting random phone calls at like, crazy hours of the night, or people like, you know, getting dressed and dolled up for someone to stay with you—it makes me kind of like, bitter, in a way. It makes you really bitter, and pissed, and kind of resentful. So that really didn't work for me.

O'Brien: How did you get clients?

Milane: I advertised on [unintelligible] and Craigslist, Backpage. Then Craigslist had got like, busted, and no more Craigslist for me, you know? And then after a while, I didn't even have to advertise, because I had like, regulars. Like, I had the regulars that would come in. (Snapping fingers).

O'Brien: Were most of the other trans folk doing sex work getting clients from online services?

Milane: Yes. The ones that I were hanging out with, that were doing sex work, they were strictly online. At that time, it was like a stark difference between the online girl and the—you know, the young lady in the street. Yeah. It was like a caste system, I guess, like a difference in class. It was like, "Oh, you know—oh, she walks the street," kind of thing. And everyone I hung out with was an online kind of girl. Which is strange, because the same guys who go and see the girls online, they purchase their pleasure also in the street, you know? Just at a discounted rate, I imagine. Maybe that was why it was—you know, the reason they have a divide between the two.

O'Brien: Like—they can't see your facial expression! (Laughter) How would you describe what you were indicating?

Milane: You know, it's like the look of disdain, like, "Hmmm."

O'Brien: Ah, yeah. And why—what would be the obstacles for girls who work the street to be able to transition to doing online work? I imagine online work is a little safer than being on the street.

Milane: Oh, it is a lot safer. It was really safe—much safer. Like, I'll tell you this. Like, all my girlfriends that had went to the street, or knew someone on the street, everyone on the street had got busted. They went to jail, for, you know, loitering, or prostitution, or what have you,

and stuff. But all the girls who worked on the internet, they didn't get busted. You know? And like, they had a more discreet clientele, so it's like, you know, the guy to whom—he can't ride around at three o'clock in the morning to pick up his pleasure, you know? He doesn't mind calling and say, "Oh, do you have any time for lunch?" You know? So it was a higher clientele. It was a huge difference between the lives, I imagine, of the online girls, the internet girls, and the other.

O'Brien: So why couldn't anyone become an internet girl?

Milane: I think it had to do more with the look, personality, and just the manner of actually speaking to someone? Because, you know, if a guy's going to call you, and you're like, "Whatcha want?" you know, "Oh. This is what I do. Wham, wham, wham," and you're like, illicit and rude and vulgar, I don't think he's going to come as much as if you're like, poised and a little refined and kind of conserved, yet at the same time showing that you're not too eager to see him, because if you seem too eager it's kind of strange. They're like, "Wait, why is she eager to see me?" you know? You have to be like, "Hmm, well if you come, you come, and if not..." you know?

O'Brien: So, performing a sort of class status.

Milane: Of course.

O'Brien: Interesting. So, people that knew how to do that, or like, train, or clued into that, could do online work more easily.

Milane: Yeah, of course. I remember when I first started doing it, one of my girlfriends says, "Oh, you're too nice to them. You're too nice to them on the phone. You're to treat them accordingly," you know? I was like, "Oh. Thank you for the knowledge." It was very interesting times.

O'Brien: Yeah. And what was the level of awareness around like, STD risk and—were people on top of that and paying attention to that, and thinking about that?

Milane: You mean the clientele, or you mean just the girls in general?

O'Brien: The girls.

Milane: Well, yeah. I would say that the girls usually were on top of, you know, STD risk. I wouldn't say they were always, you know, as knowledgeable. Like, I had one girlfriend tell me that, "Oh, you can't catch anything from sucking it. I suck all these cocks without condoms," and I'm like, "Oh, good for you. However, I think that the same juice is the same juice, you know?" Very strange. But I think that the girls usually on the internet were a little more cautious and more careful when it came to safe sex practice than the girls in the street. Because the girl in the street can easily disappear, whereas the girl on the internet, you've got her

phone number, you may have come to her house, she can't just vanish overnight, you know? Go from crystal blue to, all of a sudden, like midnight sky, in Texas. You know, she can't do that. So I guess the internet girls were more mindful.

O'Brien: Interesting. And did you do sex work until you left Atlanta, or did you do other jobs before you moved on?

Milane: Yeah, I did. I did sex work, mostly, until I left Atlanta. Strange story: I ended up coming to New York—when I was here, strange story. One of my guys—my regular guys from way back in the day—he called me and it's like, "Oh, I'm flying to New York, do you mind coming to see me?" I'm like, "Okay, no problem," he bought my ticket, I came up to see him. And he's like—he's a masochist, yeah. So, yeah. So I called my girlfriend, and I was like, "Oh, I'm here." She was like, "Oh, you know, you made quite a bit of change. You've worked hard. Why don't you just stay, and we hang out." And she—we went to her house, we were hanging out, and I just ended up like, just staying. I was just like, "Oh, this is the city for me."

O'Brien: Did you want to say more about him being a masochist? You said that and paused. I wasn't sure what...

Milane: Strangely enough, a lot of my clients actually, you know, have a knack to be dominated. And I don't know if maybe it's my personality, that I come off at times controlling and vengeful, which is like what allures them? Or maybe it's the quirkiness, or maybe it's just the whole like, erotic idea of having, you know, a trans woman dominate someone to whom is not normally—not dominated, or who is the dominant party in society usually. But then, you know, you wanna force this about it.

O'Brien: I imagine the class poise that you described in the not treating them too well, that would go along, in setting up a domination-submission dynamic.

Milane: Quite possibly.

O'Brien: So, you came to New York for a job, and had some money, and decided to stay.

Milane: Yeah. Yeah, I decided to stay. And then I ended up getting a job like, a few months later, strangely enough, which is like, how I ended up here.

O'Brien: What was the job you got?

Milane: At first, the job was CMT, which was a Case Manager Tech.

O'Brien: With Housing Works?

Milane: Yes.

O'Brien: How did you get into that? What was the transition?

Milane: So, I mean, I had already started like, going back to school.

O'Brien: Okay.

Milane: And then like, I ended up getting the job, strangely enough. So then I continued going to school, and then I was like, "Oh, this is actually pretty fun." And then, as I was working here, I talked to—I kind of like, saw myself, mirror images, I guess, inside of the clients as well as the residents, because, you know, they had like, life experiences that had formed them to who they were. And they were like, you know, normal people like I'm a person and they were, you know, just as quirky and stuff, and we matched well, and the next thing you know I was like, "Oh, I'm home. It's like I'm working without working," kind of thing.

O'Brien: But—I imagine the pay was a lot less—

Milane: Yeah.

O'Brien: —the whole schedule was radically different, like, how did you make that transition?

Milane: Okay, so that's a great point.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: So, the pay definitely was a lot less. Definitely a lot less. Like, you know, what I make in two weeks I could've easily made beating someone like, all night, you know? Actually, I probably could've made what I make in a month, beating like one person all night. And then I was like, "Oh." And then there were many I thought, "Oh, maybe I should just yank up my girls into the heavens," and, you know, get back to it. But I'm like, "Oh, I actually like, enjoy doing it." Like, a lot of times I would say, "Oh, you know, maybe today was my last day," kind of thing. But I keep finding myself coming back to work, strangely enough. And then there was a transition period, honestly, in my life, where I was like, "Oh, maybe I should take a week or two off and just, get back to the old me," and then I was—went back to yeah.

O'Brien: You're making looks again! (Laughter) Those don't show up in oral histories, so...

Milane: Yeah, they don't. But I went back to it for like, two weeks, and I was like, "Oh, you know, the money's good but, you know, there's something missing." And I think what was missing was actually like, the real connection to the person, whereas like, you know, someone comes and you beat them and degrade them and you walk them with a leash down the street, you know what I mean, so other people gawk at them and so forth—yeah, I mean, that's all fun and enjoyable, but at the end of the day, it's better to have like, you know, a connection with someone. And that's kind of like, what this job gets me. It would be nice, though, if I could work my schedule so I was able to do both.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: Kind of like a weird type of life, you know?

O'Brien: You wouldn't get much sleep. So what was—what was your initial connection to the job? Like, how did you—did you read about it? Did you run into a friend? Like, what was the process?

Milane: Yeah, my friend—my friend who already lived here, like, one day I was with her and she was like, "I have to go to Housing Works," and I was like, "Oh, what's that?" She was like, "Oh, you know, I go here and stuff for like, treatment and all this, yada yada." And we were there, and I was watching everybody like, "Hmmm." And then I saw another woman—girl who I knew way back, and stuff. She is a New York girl, but she moved down to Atlanta, and then she moved back up, and then she was working here. And I was like, "Wait!" Like, when I saw her—literally, when I saw her, I was like...

O'Brien: So somebody else had made that transition.

Milane: Yeah, she had made the transition. And when I saw her, I was like, "What the hell?" I was like, "What're you doing here?" She was like, "Oh, I work here." I'm like, "You work?" You know? And like, her and I became friends—or, we rekindled our friendship, because we were always friends, you know? Even though some time had lapsed, so we had—kind of hadn't seen each other, we were always friends. And I was like, "Oh, I think this is like, what I want to do," you know?

O'Brien: Yeah?

Milane: And I've been here ever since.

O'Brien: That's great. So, tell me about what you do as a CMT and now as a case manager.

Milane: Yes.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: So, the job isn't really much different, CMT to case manager. But, it's like, making sure people are still connected to their medical, or they have their entitlements, provide them support you know, things of that nature. Help them with their benefits. I'm back in school, so recently, like, I've been working with mindfulness with people. Because like, it's like, my thing. Like, mindfulness is like, the shit.

O'Brien: Like meditation?

Milane: Yes.

O'Brien: Interesting.

Milane: But meaningful meditation, where, like, you're actually focused on something, so that way you become more aware, and it like—I know with me, it has helped me a lot with my emotional dysregulation, because when I first started this job, if someone said something to me, I'd be like, "What, bitch?" you know? Now it's like, "Okay."

O'Brien: So, less emotionally reactive.

Milane: Yeah.

O'Brien: Where did you first encounter meditation?

Milane: Okay, so, there was a therapist named Charles Sacks? Sorry. Yeah, Charles Sacks. Sometimes I say Chucky, Chuck Sacks, because I sometimes called him Chuck. But, yeah. So he introduced me to mindfulness. You know, he introduced it to me, and I started doing my reading, then I went back to school and they started talking about it, I was like, "Oh, this is definitely the shit."

O'Brien: Where did you go back to school?

Milane: Oh, first the University of Phoenix.

O'Brien: Okay.

Milane: Yeah.

O'Brien: Did that—was that a building or an online program, or...?

Milane: It's an online program.

O'Brien: Yeah. And did you go somewhere else after that?

Milane: Yeah. Southern New Hampshire [University]. Well, that's where I'm at now.

O'Brien: Okay. Another online...?

Milane: Online, yeah. But it works for my schedule, because, you know, I'm taking like two hours to go home, two hours to come to work, so that's like four hours. Like, I literally type all of my work on my phone, like, and just email it to myself, you know, when I get home, when I get here, and it's like, done. I can do my reading on the train. That way, I'm using my time instead of, you know, sitting and waiting.

O'Brien: Being bored. And what's your relationship with trans communities, like, in New York? Are you—do you have a similar level of engagement that you had in Atlanta, or...?

Milane: No, I don't, actually. I mean I've—I've dealt with departments, like the departments, for example, like here, like TTHP program.

O'Brien: What's that?

Milane: It was the Transgender Transitional Housing [Program]. Well, we also housed people who were gender nonconforming.

O'Brien: Is that a Housing Works program?

Milane: Yeah. It was for people who were trans or gender nonconforming, but who had also a history of homelessness. So, you know, I was there for like, two years—the same two years I was here. I was actually working back and forth between the two. So that was interesting. And that's when I noticed that there's like, a huge difference in culture from here and back home.

O'Brien: What're some of the differences?

Milane: So, back home, even though everyone had their own personal things going, it was like, a closer sense of connectedness, I guess? Even though the demographics was basically the same. You know, minority trans women, or gender nonconforming women. Both groups. But there it was a sense of connectedness, and sense of community more. Whereas here, it's more like, you know, "I'm independent, and it's about me, bitch, and you can go fuck yourself." That kind of trans thought. And I don't know if that has to do with just the general culture of New York, because I notice New York—for example, like, in New York, someone mugs you, they keep walking. I don't know if you've ever been mugged before.

O'Brien: Mhm. Of course.

Milane: Yeah. They keep walking. It's not an "excuse me" or anything, you know? Either they keep walking or else it starts World War III if you say something.

O'Brien: So, more individualistic here, less integrated as a community.

Milane: Yeah, it's individual egos. Whereas in Atlanta it's more like, communal, you know? No one is really worried about taking a loss or losing, quote-unquote "face," you know, if it's better for the community as a whole. So I noticed this change. And it's even mirrored—or, it's even present in the trans community. At least, I've noticed this, personally.

O'Brien: And is the—in terms of the ways people get by, is it a similar spread between sex work and scams and...?

Milane: I would say so. Yeah, I would say so.

O'Brien: Have you noticed differences in that in New York?

Milane: Not really. When it comes to sex work, like, you know, girls are—well, yes. Actually, I have noticed a difference. I mean, they're both engaged in sex work, yes, both groups. But I notice like, here in New York, women take more pride in being engaged in sex work. It's very strange. Because like, even when I was actively engaged, and all my friends were actively engaged, we knew what we all were doing, but we didn't discuss it like, amongst other people, or openly, because, you know? You don't want to be that girl, you know? Whereas here it's like, "Oh, you know, yes. I'm a whore. I'm a prostitute. I just had a trick twenty minutes ago," you know?

O'Brien: And would that be in a social context or a political context, or what? When do people talk about it?

Milane: Open forums. Like, open forums. It's very strange.

O'Brien: Like panels?

Milane: Like—no, like open forums. Like social media, or just like, even in person. Like, I know I was walking one day, and I heard this girl saying—I was walking near the other site, the Trans Transitional—and I heard this girl say, "Oh, yeah, I just had a trick. You know, he just paid me \$100." First of all, back in my day no girl was taking \$100. No girl was taking \$100.

O'Brien: It was a lot less.

Milane: Huh? It was a lot more.

O'Brien: A lot more. Okay, tell me about the money. You didn't mention amounts at all.

Milane: It was a lot more. Like, back then and stuff, first of all, like, you know, it was a lot more. Because the group of trans women were smaller, one, and then like, there was a different caliber amongst themselves. Whereas here, the number of trans women is like—it's like rabbits, you know? It's like rabbits. You eat one and twenty more pop up, you know? Like, (laughter) it's very strange. It's like the heads of a hydra, I'm telling you! It's very strange. So I guess because the competition—or, you know, there's like a larger supply, you know—people take less, but back in my day no girl would say she took \$100.

O'Brien: How much did people get paid in the early 2000s in Atlanta? Like 300 an hour?

Milane: I'm telling you—yeah, like, you know. Like—okay, so, I would be 300. But if they came with like, you know, 270, I wouldn't—you know, I wouldn't complain. You know, I might—they

would hand me the money and I might be like, you know, “I won’t forget this, so next time, make sure,” you know? But I mean, I was grateful, nevertheless. I would never let them know I was grateful. I’d never let them know.

O’Brien: Right.

Milane: But, you know. But if he had like \$200? Like some girl—I had a girl say, “Oh, he paid me \$200,” you know, that was like, a huge amount. No! No! Not for all the work he probably had you do, you know? No.

O’Brien: And do you have a sense that domination/submission—like, how common that is? About the same here as Atlanta, or are people doing a...?

Milane: Well, I don’t know, because I don’t think—so, when it comes to domination—like, domination, humiliation, tantric sex, all that kind of stuff—I don’t think the girls here in New York really are versed in the art. I know that sounds really strange.

O’Brien: It’s as skillset.

Milane: Yeah, it is. It really is, believe it or not. They’re not versed in the art, nor are they versed in what it actually is to dominate someone, to make them feel how they should feel, you know what I mean? Because I know when I got into domination, I know my girlfriend was like, “Oh, look, this is something that they want from you, here is a list of books.” She gave me like, you know, *120 Days of Sodom*, you know, the Marquis de Sade.

O’Brien: Yeah.

Milane: She gave me like, *Justine*, she gave me like, you know, different works to read, you know, *Venus in Pelts* [*Venus in Furs*, by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch], everything, you know what I mean?

O’Brien: The classics.

Milane: And talked about it and stuff, and different things, and stuff. And so that way, like, you know, my imagination could run wild once I had something seated firmly. I don’t think the girls here allow themselves, you know, time for that education, that proper education in the art, so therefore, they can’t provide the service, you know what I mean? So therefore, it may be—well, I’m quite sure that there was a market for that here, you know? Transgender domination. But the girls aren’t as versed in that, so...

O’Brien: They don’t have the same access to the skills.

Milane: I mean, I imagine they have the access. The girls have the access to the literature and the education, but I don’t really think they care about that.

O'Brien: Interesting.

Milane: Yeah.

O'Brien: And are the drugs similar here?

Milane: No.

O'Brien: How are they different, then?

Milane: So, in Atlanta it's cocaine and ecstasy. Cocaine and ecstasy. And now I hear it's Tina—which, Tina is prevalent here also. But yeah, like, you know, the drug of choice between the trans women, it seems to be, like, crack. Which, yeah. It's like, "Oh" —you hear them say that too, all the time—"Oh, you know, this guy went to get to know me. I told him, buy me a fifty rock of crack," you know? Very strange.

O'Brien: Is it more chaotic, the drug use in New York, or similar in that way?

Milane: Yeah, I would say it's the same level of chaos, disorder in both. Yeah. But I think that has to do with like, the mindset, the cultural mindset here, and how here it's like, socially acceptable for someone to say, you know, "Oh, I'm out using this," whereas in Atlanta it's a little more conservative, I guess? So that aspect. It's still the Bible Belt, believe it or not, Atlanta. It's still a bit liberal than the rest of the South, but it's still the Bible Belt.

O'Brien: Sure. And tell me about political action in trans communities. So like, groups like Housing Works does a lot of advocacy—would trans people get involved in that, or Housing Works, or other groups, or was it people that'd really left the scene of like, sex work, that would do that, or like how much overlap was there? What was the kinds of conversations about political advocacy like?

Milane: Well, I noticed that, too. Like, the people to whom were normally partaking the services—here, that Housing Works provided—normally weren't interested in going out and engaging. But people who were outside, who saw there needed to be a change, they were more open to saying, "Oh, you know, I don't mind coming forward and showing my support, and being a part of this action."

O'Brien: Who's "outside"? What do you mean, "outside"?

Milane: Who were like outside of like—who were like, outside. Like I know trans women, for example, who don't receive services in the Housing Works community, or who weren't clients, or so forth. And they're like, "Oh, you know, this is my community, so regardless if it affects me or not, I'm going to be a part of it." It's very strange.

O'Brien: Yeah, I don't quite understand.

Milane: Which part, exactly?

O'Brien: So, people would be more open to helping with political action if they were not receiving services?

Milane: The ones to whom are receiving services are not as open and willing to be engaged in political actions, usually. I mean, there are like one or two that I could think of that're like, you know, diehard.

O'Brien: Why is that, do you think?

Milane: I think it's a number of reasons. Maybe it's the fear that, "Oh, if I go and I do something, you know, I may rock the boat for me, and me rocking the boat may not go the way I want it to go." Or it's the fear of, "Oh, if I go and I do this then, you know, maybe this will cause me financial—or, an effect to my benefits," you know?

O'Brien: People being scared about retaliation.

Milane: Or maybe about going out—yeah. I mean, everyone's afraid of some kind of retaliation, you know? Or also it's like, "Oh, if I go and do this, then people will think," you know—often I'm outed as a trans woman. Because I know a lot of girls to whom, they say, "Oh, I'm living in stealth. No one knows," and they go to like, a political action, they'll say, "Oh, now I'm outed as being a trans woman. I have a T on my chest." Yeah.

O'Brien: Interesting. And can you think of times that people have been more drawn to political action? Have there been moments that it's been more accessible to people?

Milane: Hmm. Well—I've noticed recently, like, Islan Needles? Islan Needles [Nettles], I think her name is?

O'Brien: Okay.

Milane: When she was murdered, I noticed that there was like, a huge support amongst, you know, basically everyone, but especially amongst the trans community. People were like, "Oh, this is an injustice. Someone needs to speak out." Because, you know, in that moment we all see ourselves mirrored. This is like a woman—I don't know if you remember what happened or not.

O'Brien: Tell us about it. A lot of people listening won't know.

Milane: She was the—she was a trans woman that was in Harlem, walking, and a guy was interested in her, approached her. I don't think she showed interest, and he, you know, discovered her truth, and he killed her in broad daylight, on a crowded street—on 125th.

O'Brien: What year was that?

Milane: This is 2014, maybe? 2014, maybe 15 [It was 2013]. So, it's not that far ago—far long, it's not that far gone. So when that happened, I noticed there was a huge uproar in the trans community, and everyone was, you know. I know trans women that—most trans women are like, "Oh, you know, we need support, we're trans," and other ones that lived in stealth that even came out, and they were like, "They need support," you know? That kind of thing. Back to the sheep and goats. But, yeah. So...

O'Brien: And people showed up to like, street demonstrations, or like, town halls, or big meetings, or what?

Milane: Everything. Like, it caused such a commotion that like, you know, everybody wanted to be—everybody wanted to be there, everybody wanted to be heard, like, no voice wanted to be silenced, kind of thing. You know?

O'Brien: What groups did that work happen through?

Milane: What groups did that work happen through? I think the trans community in whole, and the LGBT community. At the time, you know, it's like, that's when the Trans Lives Matter t-shirts came out. I don't know if you've seen them?

O'Brien: I have, yeah.

Milane: Yeah. I actually saw a young lady like, two or three days ago, with a Trans Lives Matter shirt, and that was like, "Huh, she's got balls," you know? No pun.

O'Brien: But that—was that ever an organization, or was that a—I think of Trans Lives Matter as being a slogan that like, sometimes BYP100 [Black Youth Project 100] people wear it, sometimes ALP [Audre Lorde Project] people, sometimes people that aren't in any organizations at all.

Milane: Yeah, I don't think it's like a—more or less an organization, but I think it was like, you know—it's something that resounded through the community just in general, and like, you know—like, everyone grabbed their pitchfork and torch and was ready, you know? That kind of thing, so...

O'Brien: Yeah, so—but if people are coming together in meetings, somebody's got to book the room, somebody's got to, you know?

Milane: Yeah, I mean, as to that, I wasn't knowledgeable who was, you know, upfront, kicking in the door before we all made our way. But there definitely were a number of people ready, you know?

O'Brien: And what were they kind of going after, or were there demands, were there, like, things that people hoped would happen out of it?

Milane: Well, I think at that time they were, you know, demanding justice for the woman to whom was slain. Unfortunately, she did not receive justice. I don't know if you recall.

O'Brien: I didn't remember.

Milane: Oh. She didn't receive justice. He was acquitted, or found not guilty, or something. And of course that caused another uproar, and all the [unintelligible] other stuff, but they were demanding justice. They were demanding that trans people are treated equally and stuff. And they brought up, for example, like, the New York City ordinances that allow people reasonable accommodations, and you walking down the street minding your own damn business, you should be allowed to live in peace. You know? No one should have to come up to you and—and because they're harassing you and they discover—sorry—they discover, you know, whatever you got going on, they shouldn't feel like they have the right to punish you.

O'Brien: And the political groups that do do organizing with trans people, trans people of color, do people know about them? Do they have opinions about them? Do they ignore them? Like, what?

Milane: I'm not really knowledgeable, because, I mean, as far as here in New York, like, I'm kind of like, an introvert.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: Yeah. So, I mean—not saying I don't have moments where I'm like, you know, outgoing, but for the most of time, I'm kind of to myself, and out of the community. Every now and again I glaze over, you know, the local New York community, you know, "Hi, just passing through," you know?

O'Brien: Show up to an event, or on Twitter, or what does that look like, passing through?

Milane: Yeah, it's like—you know, I show up and I'm just passing through, on one of the Facebook forums for the girls, or else like, actually at an event, you know, it's like there it's like, "Oh, it's Paris! Like, hi. I know who to hear between events," you know?

O'Brien: Yeah. What kind of events?

Milane: I'm going to have to—I don't know. A few events that they've had here. They—from the Transgiving.

O'Brien: Transgiving?

Milane: Yes.

O'Brien: A Thanksgiving for trans people?

Milane: Yes.

O'Brien: Excellent!

Milane: Transgiving. That was actually—

O'Brien: Is that a Housing Works thing?

Milane: Housing Works was part of it, but it was this group, Man Made, that actually threw that.

O'Brien: Oh, awesome.

Milane: So, I went to that. I went to other events afterwards, but that's the one that stuck in my mind, because it was like, really—yeah, it was a really fun event.

O'Brien: That's awesome.

Milane: Yeah.

O'Brien: And what do you do for fun?

Milane: Read and travel, usually. I told you, I'm like, an introvert.

O'Brien: What kind of books do you read?

Milane: What don't I read, is the question! So, I read everything. A great number through the poetry. Poetry by Ingeborg Bachmann.

O'Brien: Bachmann?

Milane: Ingeborg Bachmann, yeah.

O'Brien: Who is that?

Milane: She's an Austrian writer. Like, in the 60s, really. Like, shortly after World War II to the 60s, yeah. So, a lot of—a lot of stuff she writes and stuff, mind you, is kind of like, feminist in nature. So, I enjoy her. I also enjoy Sappho. Which is kind of weird, because like—

O'Brien: You enjoy what?

Milane: Sappho?

O'Brien: Oh, Sappho. The ancient Greek poet. Yeah.

Milane: Yeah. Which is kind of weird, because like, this means that you know, so you're probably looking at me like, diehard feminist.

O'Brien: There was a recent translation of Sappho that came out, right? A couple of years ago? I feel like it was making the rounds.

Milane: I don't know. Like, the one I had was kind of like, an older translation.

O'Brien: Oh, okay.

Milane: But I mean, it's possible.

O'Brien: I think maybe it was Anne Carson [It was], or some big name poet, recently, was involved in publishing a new translation. I forget.

Milane: Yeah. I read her poems, and her fragments and stuff. She had—she's like, really like—she's a really great writer.

O'Brien: Nice.

Milane: Yeah.

O'Brien: What's your—so, you're worried that we might think you're a feminist. What's your relationship to feminism?

Milane: Well, I mean, I'm a feminist in the point of saying, you know, I believe women should be treated fairly. But I mean like, that's like—basically, I think that there's a stark difference between a woman and a man, probably because I'm a trans woman, like—I guess like, someone could split hairs here, because I've had friends split hairs. Like I have a heterosexual friend who literally split hairs when I said there's a difference between a woman and a man. That didn't really go well. (Laughter) That conversation did not go well. But, yeah. And—but I believe like, you know, a woman should be, you know, a woman, and a guy should be a guy.

O'Brien: Like in their gender roles? Like, what do you mean by that?

Milane: Yes, in gender roles. Remember, I'm southern!

O'Brien: So like, women shouldn't be too butch, or...?

Milane: Yes. Women shouldn't be too butch. Ladies should be ladylike, and have those qualities. Which is kind of strange, because I'm a trans woman, you wouldn't expect this. But I am a southerner. Southern first, (snaps fingers) trans second.

O'Brien: Huh. There's some butch women in the south.

Milane: Not where I'm from. The ladies are usually ladies, you know? And they act like ladies, even though they—even though they may be a little mouthy, you know? And outspoken. But they're still ladies at the end of the day. They know how to behave, and such. And like, I consider myself to be a lady.

O'Brien: What else do you read?

Milane: Mmm, I read a lot of stuff. [Charles] Bukowski, Reinaldo Arenas, I'm trying to think like, the stuff that I read like, last.

O'Brien: Mostly literature and poetry?

Milane: Yeah. I mean when it comes to poetry, like, you know. I like [Juan Manuel] Roca, I like [Pablo] Neruda, I like George Forrest. I just started reading him.

O'Brien: And what has he written? What—is he a poet?

Milane: Yeah. He's a poet, I think from like, the 20s or the 30s. Like, French poet and stuff. He's like, kind of like, wild but fun, kind of guy. I think we would've been good friends. We would've been good friends. Me, him, and Bukowski, perhaps. If I was a writer in those days, and stuff, mind you, and we all lived in the same area, we probably would've been good friends.

O'Brien: Do you write poetry?

Milane: No.

O'Brien: Might you write poetry?

Milane: I used to, but—I used to, but sometimes people were like, "Oh, this is a little out there," you know? I didn't think it really connected with—I didn't think it would connect, really. But who knows, because Bukowski didn't think his poems really connected with people, and like—he was like American [unintelligible], you know? Life is strange.

O'Brien: And are you connected to other communities in New York? Like, who do you hang out with in New York when you see people?

Milane: Yes, actually. Yes. Like, I'm a member of like, a French book club. Yeah. And like, this German meetup. So like, where like—those are like, all my friends come from either one of those two groups. It's like, very strange.

O'Brien: What was the second one?

Milane: A German meetup.

O'Brien: German meetup?

Milane: Yeah.

O'Brien: For people who read German, or who are German?

Milane: People who speak German.

O'Brien: Speak German.

Milane: Yeah.

O'Brien: Do you speak German?

Milane: Yeah, I speak German.

O'Brien: And where did you learn German?

Milane: I speak German and French.

O'Brien: Yeah. Where did you learn to—German and French?

Milane: Okay, so.

O'Brien: You skipped over that part.

Milane: It never came up. It never came up. Okay, so, my eldest brother, he was in the—I think it was the—might be the Air Force, but it might be the Military. Yeah, so like, he lived in Germany, and his children are all by a German woman.

O'Brien: Are all what?

Milane: By a German woman. So, growing up we learned German—

O'Brien: So, your nieces and nephews.

Milane: Yeah, my nieces and nephews. Growing up we learned German, because sometimes they'd code switch, so they mix the two. Or sometimes it's easier to just speak German with them.

O'Brien: So you learned German from your brother's family.

Milane: Yes.

O'Brien: And you lived with them when you were a kid?

Milane: Well, more like when they would come, they would live with us, kind of thing. Yeah.

O'Brien: Great. So when you're reading an Austrian—post-war Austrian poet, you're reading—

Milane: In German.

O'Brien: —in German. Yeah, that makes sense.

Milane: Yeah, I read her in German. I mean, there are like—granted, there are subtle differences between Austrian German and German German, but it's like—it's intelligible. Occasionally you get to a word that is different, or something that's a little funny, but it's not a big deal.

O'Brien: So, a lot of people learn languages through chatting while growing up, then really struggle around reading, but you—did you spend a lot of time studying on your own, or did it just come very easily to you?

Milane: Languages actually come easily to me. Yeah. They come easily to my father, too, so I don't know if it's like a hereditary thing. Like, that's up for debate. Like, it's hereditary intelligence. Who knows? But, yeah. But I write, read, and speak German, French, and Spanish.

O'Brien: Excellent. And when did you learn Spanish?

Milane: Okay. So I learned Spanish because when I first moved to New York, my first boyfriend was Panamanian, and then my ex-husband was Panamanian, too. Yeah.

O'Brien: You had some through chatting with them.

Milane: Yeah.

O'Brien: Yeah. So you do pick up quickly.

Milane: It comes in handy in New York, though.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: Yeah, it really comes in handy. Especially since I live in the Bronx. Like, people speak to me usually in Spanish before they speak to me in English.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: It's like, very strange.

O'Brien: Where—do you know where your family—has your family been in Georgia for a long time?

Milane: One side has, and the other side hasn't.

O'Brien: Where does the other side come from?

Milane: Martinique. It's a little island—oh, you know it?

O'Brien: I know a lot about Martinique.

Milane: Oh, really?

O'Brien: But tell us about—

Milane: Have you visited?

O'Brien: I have not been there, no.

Milane: Oh, you should go! Don't go to Fort-de-France though, because everything is kind of high in Fort-de-France. Go to like, somewhere like, south, or like, something.

O'Brien: Frantz Fanon was from Martinique, so I've read about it a lot in that context.

Milane: Oh, cool, cool, cool. Yeah, but it's—so, France has its Overseas Departments, just like the US has like, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, and I think Guam. Yes, Guam. It's like the same kind of thing. So it's like, in the Caribbean, but it's part of France, but it's technically not part of France because it's in the Caribbean. Yeah, it's kind of weird. So there's like, Martinique, and there is Guadeloupe, and there is French Guiana.

O'Brien: Which part of your family is from Martinique?

Milane: My father's side.

O'Brien: And have you gone there?

Milane: Yes.

O'Brien: And what was that like?

Milane: I don't really like Martinique. Yeah, I don't like Martinique. Well, I don't like Fort-de-France. I like—when it comes to the French Caribbean, I like Guadeloupe, which is where I usually go for like, vacation.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: Yeah. Because like, the people are like, a whole lot different.

O'Brien: How so?

Milane: Okay, so, in Martinique, people are like, usually more like, snootier than they are in France, which is very strange. Whereas in Guadeloupe like, they're like, a lot more friendlier, and amiable. And also I notice like, in Martinique like, when you tell someone you're trans, they're like, "What?" Like, they're like, not really like—they're not able to grasp, sometimes they don't really accept it, this whole big thing. Yeah. Whereas like, in Guadeloupe they're like, "Oh, no big deal," you know?

O'Brien: Why is that?

Milane: "Let's go on a date." I think it's because it's like, Guadeloupe has like, more like, a relaxed culture.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: And like, it's like a relaxing environment, like, you know. Like, people live and enjoy life, as is, you know? And they accept life as it is. And they keep moving with that. Whereas in Martinique, it's like, "Oh, well we have to reform this to fit this," you know? It's like, fucking crazy.

O'Brien: And what—in both Atlanta and New York, what are relationships between Afro-Caribbean and African American people like? Is there a lot of mixing, is there—like, are there tensions, or...?

Milane: Hmm. I don't really know. I—all my friends here are like, Afro-Caribbean, strangely enough. And that's strange, too. Like, oh, that's like, really strange, because like, usually Afro-Caribbean people are usually like, close-minded when it comes to like, gender issues and stuff.

But my friends who are Afro-Caribbean like, they're like all heterosexual men and women who know I am trans. Because it was like—when I first moved here, I was like, “Oh, this is something I shouldn't share,” but then I was like, “Oh, fuck it. They know, they know. They don't know, I don't give a fuck.” You know? But like, they're like—they're like really cool.

O'Brien: What—why do you think that is? Why are you...?

Milane: I don't know. I think like, more like, it has to do with like, being in the US and becoming Americans, because in the Caribbean it's not really something that is like, usually acceptable or something.

O'Brien: I—most of my relationships for a long time were in HIV and AIDS scenes, and there are tons of Afro-Caribbean people who in that community had gotten to know trans people, you know, in HIV and AIDS services. But I live in a mostly Afro-Caribbean neighborhood, and I never talked about trans stuff with my neighbors, and I don't really know how it'd go over.

Milane: Hmm. It's like a very strange—it's strange, right? I don't know, because like—okay, so, where I live, in the Bronx, it's like, you know, a strictly Latino community. Strictly Latino. Like I said, in my neighborhood they speak to you in Spanish before they speak to you in English. So, I notice it's also the same thing in like, the Latino community, like even though there's this huge, like, machismo thing with the guys, like, everyone seems to be open and stuff to like, trans folk in general, it seems like. At least, that's my experience.

O'Brien: Are you out in your neighborhood?

Milane: No, not really out, but I mean, I have friends and stuff who occasionally come over and visit when I come to New York, and like, you know, they're trans, and they have never had any issues, they still get guys hitting on them at the store, you know, they still get taken out on dates when they're here. Sometimes I'm like, “Oh, girl, what're you all doing?” because it's like—

O'Brien: And they're read when they're out? People can tell they're trans.

Milane: Yeah. I'm gonna use the bathroom really quickly.

O'Brien: Yeah. (Recording pauses and resumes) So, what more would you like to talk about in this oral history?

Milane: I don't know. I mean, I'm pretty open. That's why I was like, you know, whatever. But I thought about it and stuff. I think the reason why—I think the reason why oftentimes there's a divide between the African American community and the Afro-Caribbean community, when it comes to LGBT issues, is because like, laws like buggery for example were—they were on the books and stuff, so forth and stuff. And some places for example, like Guadeloupe and Martinique and stuff, they did criminalize, you know, same sex issues and so forth, many, many,

many moons ago. That wasn't really so in other parts of the Caribbean, so—man, I see how you can say, “Oh, I don't know how those conversations would go.” Yeah. Because you don't always know exactly where someone's coming from that—that's how it gets a different mentality.

O'Brien: So it's—state policy makes a big difference in shaping culture.

Milane: How it is.

O'Brien: Certainly in the US, places have varied a lot in their history of criminalization for homosexuality.

Milane: And even like, trans issues. For example, in Louisiana, I remember years ago I had a friend who got arrested for “crimes against nature.” For dressing countersex.

O'Brien: They're getting all these laws passed all over the place, legalizing discrimination against trans people or making it really explicit that trans people aren't allowed to access—

Milane: To use the bathroom, right? Yeah. It's like—it's ridiculous. I actually had the same conversation with my grandmother not too long ago. She was like, “Oh, well,” —we were sitting, my grandmother and I were sitting at the table, and she was like, “Oh, well, you know, how would you feel if a trans person came into the bathroom?” and I just looked at her, like really?

O'Brien: When was this?

Milane: This was like, when the whole thing happened in North Carolina [the passing of HB2, the “trans bathroom bill”], less than a year ago.

O'Brien: Very recently!

Milane: Yes! Like a year, a year and a half ago.

O'Brien: But she knows you're trans!

Milane: I know! It was crazy. She was like, “How would you feel if a trans person came and used the bathroom?” and I just looked at her, and she looked at me.

O'Brien: What was she thinking?

Milane: I have no idea! And then I was like, “Well, I imagine that they've been using the bathroom for a long time. Whatever they're doing in their stall has nothing to do with you.”

O'Brien: That's so deep. So what's her fantasy of a trans person that's—that you are...?

Milane: I don't know. It was like, crazy. Okay, so, it went like—because I was flying to Atlanta, and I was flying with, I think United Airways, so like, United Airways goes New York to Charlotte, Charlotte to Atlanta. It was like, the cheapest one, even though I had to stop, so I booked the cheap ticket. Yeah, but like, you know, I was like, “Oh, yeah, I'm going to use the bathroom while I was there,” and then she brought it up, you know what I mean? And when she said that I just looked at her, like, really? Really?

O'Brien: Wow. What was it like for your—I mean, you weren't—as you were coming out or transitioning, you weren't living with your family anymore.

Milane: No.

O'Brien: So what has your connection been with them since then?

Milane: Bittersweet. For the most part, like, I've had people to whom were accepting. Like my aunt, for example, she was like, really, really accepting and stuff, I have another aunt who was really, really accepting, cousins who were really, really accepting. Then on the flip side of the coin were other family members that were like, they gave pushback from hell, and like, they want to use like, your birth name for everything. Strangely enough, this same grandmother finally called me Paris, after like, living as a woman now for a long-ass time, like, about a year and a half ago. And since then, she's always called me Paris, like, this year and a half. But like, she always called me my birth name. And I could—I'm telling you I could sit there like, breasts [unintelligible] and everything, and she'd still, like—she said it wasn't intentional. I don't know. Because like, all these years I would correct it. And on the flip side, like, her husband, my grandfather, he's always used the right name, right pronoun, you know? Never had an issue. It's like, weird. But I think that has to do with—like, sometimes women not wanting like, pushback or feeling like, “Oh, this is a threat,” you know, “Trans folk.” I know it sounds really crazy, right? It sounds crazy. A woman having the idea sometimes that all trans folks are coming and stuff, and this is a threat, when really it's not. Like, everybody wants to live their own personal life.

O'Brien: Yeah. I know the feminist rhetoric around us being a threat, but women in general, I don't really know what the—I mean, besides not believing—like, believing trans people are freaks, or just really weird, or something—but what's the threat, what's the vision of the threat?

Milane: Yeah, I know, it's like so crazy. There was an article that I read like, two or three days ago, and it caused like, this whole stir on Facebook, where this woman was like, “Oh, you know, I don't want to” —she was like, “I'm a feminist and I'm for women's rights and stuff, but why do trans women have to be called women?” She was like, “I don't want to go inside of the locker room and see penises swinging,” you know? And all this. And I'm saying to myself like, “I'm quite sure even in the men's locker room there are not penises just swinging.” I mean, unless the person has like, no couth, class, or self-dignity at all, you know, I'm quite sure you're not going to see like, their most intimate parts, you know, like “Here you go! Out on display.” No, that's not probably going to happen. It's just crazy.

O'Brien: It seems like there's a moment of backlash and hostility around trans rights right now, around bathroom bills and the articles by transphobic feminists in the newspaper.

Milane: Transphobic feminists. Hashtag.

O'Brien: TERFs, I think they call it.

Milane: TERFs?

O'Brien: Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists.

Milane: Oh, okay.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: Interesting.

O'Brien: Yeah. Cool. Yeah, anything else you want to add, or...?

Milane: It's like, a pretty good chat. It lasted quite some time.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Milane: Sorry to [unintelligible] you.

O'Brien: No, no, I'm absolutely available. Thank you so much for this time. I really appreciated hearing your story, and your thoughts on the world and trans communities in Atlanta and New York.

Milane: Yeah, thank you.