NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

K. KERIMIAN

Interviewer: Mia Calzolaio

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Transcribed by Khonner Damon

NYC TOHP Interview #220

Mia Calzolaio: Hello, my name is Mia Calzolaio and I will be having a conversation with K. Kerimian for the New York City Trans Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is August 3rd, 2023, and this is being recorded in Bed-Stuy. Hello.
K. Kerimian: Hello.

Calzolaio: Could you just introduce yourself briefly, name, pronouns, age, if you want?

Kerimian: Yeah. I'm K Kerimian. I use they, them pronouns, and I am 34-ish, living in Brooklyn.

Calzolaio: Could you start by telling me a little bit about where you grew up?

Kerimian: Sure. I'm born and raised Long Island, so near to where I live, though very different culturally. Classic middle-class suburbs, though Long Island is historically built in a racist, segregated sort of, like there's pockets of different people where a lot of people have the association with Long Island of, like, the Hamptons. I did not grow up in the Hamptons [Laughter] um. So I'm white and raised lower-middle class, so I feel like that's an important detail because Long Island has a lot of range between class specifically. And in mentioning the racial segregation, that was very much a part of how Long Island was constructed by Robert Moses. So I'm kind of like the middle of the middle of the island, quite homogenous, yeah.

Calzolaio: Were you- when you grew up, did you experience any kind of class tension between, I guess, people who were kind of going out to the Hamptons? [Laughter]

Kerimian: I can't say I knew too many of those folks, but my parents, who had children rather early compared to some of their peers, got to live different lives. Like my parents started having kids at 20. I'm the youngest of four, so they had four kids before they turned 30. My dad became a union electrician to just, like, pay those bills, was union electrician in Manhattan, commuting all the time while my mom was raising four kids, two of whom are on the autism spectrum. And in the 80s, there wasn't, like, the care and awareness that there is now. So very, very different um home life from many of my peers in school or neighbors. I didn't, like, invite people to the home because of not wanting to witness my brothers be judged and made fun of, basically. So that was also part of, like, the kids are awful. Like, that was something that was, like, I was very protective of my home while also feeling a little bit I don't know that embarrassed is quite right, but maybe in that way that I was protective and there was a lot of pride in my family, I was also aware of like, we're different and that's not a good thing to many people. I think more in school rather than the people who go to the Hamptons, it was more like the kids who had name brand things and the kids who had computers or like I couldn't afford lunch in school. Like those little things that I don't think in the moment really dictated who I was, but were much more subtle parts of my life that were just normal for me. But it wasn't until like later as an adult living on my own reflecting on like, dang, my parents had to like do some shit that in my 20s I would not have been able to do. Yeah, so that was more of like my class experience where we weren't on food stamps, but we also never went on a vacation. So I don't think it's a terribly unique class identity experience in the States or Long Island for many people um. But I think just because it was normal for me, I didn't really think otherwise unless

another child pointed it out. It was really like the, oh, I didn't know I should be embarrassed about this, but now I'm embarrassed because others are pointing it out.

Calzolaio: And what were you interested in as a child?

Kerimian: I was actually rather shy as a kid. I think a chaotic home, like big family, my brothers who speak mostly through echolalia. So delayed speech means most of their language is derived from literal movie quotes strung together from emotional context and unfiltered and also kind of like simultaneous, unprovoked and spontaneous amongst like the rest of the family dynamic and the small house we had. So I kind of like kept to myself and read a lot. I wrote a lot of like little imaginative stories. I played make-believe as a millennial. I got to see them like before the internet through the development of that technology. So kind of like the memes of the internet of like, say how old you are without saying how old you are is like, I remember dial-up. I was 10. So I had like a pretty technology-less childhood. Lots of like rallying the neighborhood kids into the basement in which I'd produce original plays, but was pretty quiet at home, pretty isolated, just like wanting to be able to like be imaginative and alone was comforting. And then in class I always got the, “K, it's a pleasure to have in class, but talks too much and distract the other kids.” And I'd come home, my parents would read the report card, and they'd be like, “who's that kid who talks so much?” Because I really was very quiet at home.

Calzolaio: Did you like going to school?

Kerimian: I loved school, but I wasn't a very good student. And I think the socialization may indicate that, is I loved being able to socialize in a structured setting. I loved music. I loved going to the library and recess. I loved writing and reading. So those are still things that are a part of who I am now. And I didn't really have the home culture of books. While my dad started in college because he pivoted to a union job rather early, my family isn't one of higher education. My mom didn't have that opportunity. So while it wasn't exactly sheltered, it also wasn't like a household with books. So really going to school was like, I got to read and that was exciting. And I'd get books from the school library. Was always social. Did the talent show kind of thing. [Laughter] I was the dog. But I don't think the way I learned was very conducive to like the school setting of like sitting at a desk and raising your hand. Like I never wanted to be the kid that raised my hand. I never asked my parents for help with homework. I didn't really like know how to study and build that work ethic as a student. So I kind of reflect on being a student in areas where I didn't naturally excel. And there's like a little bit of like, oh, I wish I either tried harder or like asked for help. But I think I just gravitated toward like the drama club is where I wound up and in chorus. And that's really where I found a lot of being myself in school, especially like growing through high school. Yeah, it was always the arts.

Calzolaio: What relationships were important to you? [Laughter] Either with friends or family or otherwise.

Kerimian: Sure. I went to a pretty big school district. And so there wasn't really always the opportunity to meet people even in my own graduating class or sometimes even in the same classroom. We just we'd see so many different people over the years. I had a pretty core group of friends because we were all very involved in performing arts through high school. But uh

those friendships kind of deteriorated quickly at the end of high school. But also, you know, going through college and then being an adult, which you get to find your people and realize you can choose who to be around makes me reflect on who I was close to and what relationships were important then. It was kind of by proxy, like by proximity, those relationships were important to me. And none of those school relationships have stood the test of time. My family was always important to me. My nuclear and extended family. My mom's sister, who was my godmother, but I don't believe in God. So it's like my earth mother was incredibly important to me. She was the one who introduced me to visual art and like going to museums and being outdoors. The experiences I just didn't get to have in my family because; big family, limited parent time, lots of chaos.

Calzolaio: Do you have any particular memories with her?

Kerimian: Yeah. We never had camp or like many extracurriculars just because of finances and time. But several summers I would go away and stay with her the whole summer.

Calzolaio: Where did she live?

Kerimian: North Carolina. In a little enclave that was like all ex-New Yorkers [Laughter]. So the accent and the culture was heavy. It didn't really feel like seeing a different place. But it got to just kind of be a mental and emotional break from where I was. And she and I had much more... Oh, shit[Phone rings]. Sorry.

Calzolaio: I think you were talking about kind of being in North Carolina with your mom's sister.

Kerimian: Yeah yeah. Which is like my aunt, but that doesn't feel like the right word to describe the relationship. That's how significant of an impact she made. When you think of like the fun relative, that was her. And I use past tense because she unfortunately died rather early in her life several years ago uh. But so held a huge place in my like where I get to be free as a person. Like, you know, classic teenage like rebellion of wanting to dress a little bit differently and start presenting myself a little bit differently. And my creative freedom. My mom is very traditional and did not like those things. Whereas Patty, my aunt, my old friend, really encouraged and celebrated that. And so that was a really positive relationship, as you can imagine, to have someone rooting for you and not trying to make you feel badly for expressing yourself and being a little different. Yeah.

Calzolaio: How are you presenting yourself at the time?

Kerimian: [Laughter] So like for context, today I'm a little bit more in the like...masc/ androgenous, kind of like almost this simple uniform of like I wear like the same pair of Converse every day and the same they-them fanny pack. But then I would wear like two different colors shoes and I always had wacky socks and I had like bangle and beaded bracelets like all the way up my arm. I dye my hair a different unnatural color like every other month.

Calzolaio: This was when you were younger?

Kerimian: Yeah, in high school. High school and college. But so that was the period where I was staying with Patty for summers and my mom was like “go to Patty's, I can't deal with this, this is

too much." I like started sewing my own clothes but like not in like a well-crafted way. I was doing a lot of thrifting but the pieces were cobbled together in a way that didn't necessarily derive from fashion. Like I don't think I had a fashion sense as much as I was like I feel different, can't put my finger on it. The trying to be like a girl, like the popular cheerleader type in my school was like just very common in Long Island and you know like talking about class earlier like the not having name brand things like I never had a pair of Uggs when those were cool. This was like my way of avoiding and defying the like if I can't be that and do it well opposed to like trying but wearing like the Kmart version of things then I'd like go out of my way to have like all mismatched colors and like a skirt on top of jeans with bright leggings and I'd draw all over my pants and just yeah. So I don't know it was it was kind of a catch-all presentation that wasn't like strictly gendered but I think it was playing with expectation more than gender.

Calzolaio: Did you have any role models you were looking to at the time for fashion inspiration?

Kerimian: That's a good question. I don't necessarily think so because I didn't really see it in my peers in high school like as I started evolving in that direction. But I think I just started noticing me standing out and realizing how out of place I felt like internally always like growing up in like early teenagehood. I always kind of felt out of place in a way I couldn't put my finger on. It's like classic queer trans experience. So without me having like a specific role model or public figure because we didn't really have like very visible gender non-conforming people to look to in popular culture in the 90s. I think once I started presenting in this like wacky unconventional way, it allowed me to feel like the outside matched the inside and that if I was getting stares or being treated differently or people just remarked on what I was wearing, it didn't bother me as much and kind of became a like, I'm my own role model. I don't know that I was entirely that confident to be able to say that then, but looking at like the quote unquote fashion choices I was making, I'm like, I don't really even know where it came from. And then not that long after like in adulthood, like beyond college, I kind of looked back on that and was like, that was so weird and good for me, I guess. But it was very much a part of who I was in my-, I wasn't a rebellious kid. Like I never like cursed. I was that like, for all of my like going outside the lines and how I was dressing or expressing myself, I also like wouldn't smoke, wouldn't drink, wouldn't go out late. So I was like still kind of like structured and conventional in that way. So in terms of like calling this rebellion, it's like a pretty quiet, tame rebellion to wear different colors that didn't match.

Calzolaio: And were you aware of kind of your own or generally like queerness and transness at the time?

Kerimian: I think in that vague, couldn't put my finger on it way. But there are a lot of moments that as someone who named my transness later in my life, when I reflect to pick up the pieces, like the clues were there all along. This is like a very silly story, but my mom loved this anecdote. And for years I was just kind of like, Oh no I was a weird kid. And then I'm like, oh, it makes sense. But very, very young, like in that precocious four or five age, my mom in this very like heteronormative way was like, do you want to have babies and be a mom when you grow up, like playing with dolls? And I very matter of factly was like, I can't have babies. I'm going to have puppies. And my mom was like, well, you can't have puppies. You make babies. Like it was very

much not just them like your body can do this. It was like your body will do this in a prescriptive prediction sort of way. And I very firmly was like, oh, my body can't do that. Not just in a like I'm making a choice that I won't do that. It was like a belief that my body um. And I don't think I called it like I'm not a girl. I was never a tomboy either. Like I wasn't into sports and hanging out with the boys. So that's a lot of like how, again, in the 90s, like gender kind of fit into that category of you're either a girly girl who played with dolls or a tomboy who dressed more like a boy, but you were still a girl. Like that was kind of it for the range. So I think because I wasn't a tomboy when I was trying to figure out like in high school to where I fit, I also was confused at like, well, can I be this if I'm not that? Like thinking that queerness meant one thing or gender meant one thing. And it always had to do with the binary and it always had to do with all or nothing. So it was like, can I be someone who likes multiple genders? That didn't seem like a possibility. Like bisexuals were not really a thing, at least in representation. [Laughter] a really funny, I think it's Time Magazine or Newsweek. There's this like, it looks very silly now because they kind of look like X-Men where it's like bisexuals, where did they come from? And there's just like three people, this like ubiquitous sort of like, this is what a bisexual looks like thing.

Calzolaio: Do you remember what year that was from?

Kerimian: I have to say it was the mid 90s. I think I actually came upon that in my 20s from finding, from following like an LGBT archive, like a history or something like that where I found it on Instagram and I was like, that's hilarious because it was like a new species has arrived. So in terms of the like, I like more than just boys, but all I've ever been conditioned to like, my mom was like classic, do you have a boyfriend when I was in kindergarten? So of course I said yes kind of thing, right? There was never the, do you like anyone in school? And then exploring or being open to it. I don't think I was ever met with resistance as much as it just like went into that box very quickly and then never really diverged out outside of that narrative. So it's super confusing to just be like, can I be this if I also notice when I'm in the locker room that I shouldn't be here? Like I was in elementary school, I think in a gym class in like the sixth grade. And it was the first time I noticed that the other people in the room with me were starting to wear bras, like training bras. And I didn't need one yet, but I was kind of like for the first time realizing, oh, like bodies are shameful, like being naked, getting changed, which was usually like changing your top. And I would always find the bathroom to change, or I would do this [Laughter] very crafty, like maneuvering myself out of from under my shirt and then not taking it off and putting the next shirt on over my head, like doing anything I could to not reveal my chest. That stayed like through my adulthood as someone who moves through performing arts, like I was in dressing rooms. So after like the locker room experience ended, I still was in public changing experiences with other people in the room. And like as recent as like 2018, 19 was so skittish about being seen. And it was part of the like, I'm not supposed to be here because your body's- like everyone's comfortable. Like no one else seemed to have that issue. And then it was also like the, I'm noticing things in a way that like feels a little inappropriate to like, I had to find myself looking and then like quickly avert my gaze. Like I didn't want someone to notice I was looking. So I had those, not just signs, but like I was aware of those things at the time and then couldn't quite name it. I- I honestly think not having vocabulary and representation was a big part of my coming into my queerness later. I was like, I was always queer and the signs were always there.

But you know, we had Queer Eye for the straight guy by the time I was in middle school. Like I was 13, I think. Will and Grace was like when I was around that age. And those were like landmark. It's the first time there's ever been gay people on TV. And it was gay men, white gay men for the most part, right? Like it was a very specific type of representation and gay was the only word you were hearing. Definitely not queer or anything that allowed kind of this range or nebulous identity. Yeah. So in terms of them, like when did I know? Did I know? Did I feel? I feel like the answer was always yes, but I didn't know what it was for a long time.

Calzolaio: Were you using the internet at all kind of as you were growing up to engage with queerness or kind of find communities outside of where you lived?

Kerimian: You know what? I didn't actually. And it's funny you should ask that because I immediately was like, why didn't I? And I think because I didn't know what it was. Like I mostly talked to my friends, like the people I knew on AIM. At the time it was very big to like have a live journal and kind of like put stupid quotes with your friends online. So it was very insulated, even though the internet meant I could go anywhere and do anything to explore topics. It truly never occurred to me that I could go beyond my geographic location. We also had like a family computer with six to seven people living in the house at a given time. And it was in a common room. So I never wanted to look at anything. I think like the one time I even had like chat room sex with a boyfriend in sophomore year, it was like looking over my shoulder like, is anyone watching while they were all watching TV? Like it felt so public. And yeah, so it did not even occur to me. So no, I didn't. I think even as I moved up until kind of like coming out, I didn't even really look for those things in that abstract Googling way. I've definitely taken those quizzes of like, am I gay or how gay are you though? Or like, are you more man or woman? Like those like Buzzfeed quizzes, there were plenty of those I think later in my high school experience. By the time I was actually like close to coming out of the closet.

Calzolaio: What age, I guess, if you want to put an age to it, did you come out?

Kerimian: Um 16 or 17, around there, end of high school. And it definitely started with having a crush on someone who was out and owned being out when there were very few people who were out. The person I had a crush on also dressed in a very like overt, I'm a butch, fuck you kind of way.

Calzolaio: Did you know what a butch was at the time?

Kerimian: No, but I like, you could spot it a mile away, right? Like the hair, the binder, the like bigger pants and docks to kind of like disguise some part of the feminine body. So that was like my ring of keys moment.

Calzolaio: Do you want to briefly explain what a ring of keys moment is?

Kerimian: [Laughter] Yes, so in Alison Bechdel's graphic novel memoir, Fun Home, which was adapted into a musical and so has kind of expanded its popularity, little Alison has a moment, I think she's like nine in the memoir, where she's at a diner and a delivery person like bringing like, I don't know, supplies to the restaurant comes in and is doing the like, can you sign for this order and had like the big old carabiner of keys, didn't have a purse, I think was the like

distinguishing factor was someone who had really short hair, like a man's, fit kind of into that like masculine feminine dichotomy of like, this is the gender role and this is defying the gender role. Like especially for the time. But the literal ring of keys, uh in the graphic novel, it was the lightbulb moment for Alison Bechdel of like, “there's someone who looks like I feel.” And then when it was adapted into a musical, there's a whole number dedicated to it called *Ring of Keys* in which the little actor, like the little Alison actor gets to sing. And it's this like beautiful power ballad. And it's about how this person's presenting. So it has nothing to do with hearing the label lesbian has nothing to do with even like seeing this person with another woman or kissing or anything like it completely came out of how this person was presenting that recognition. So when I say my Ring of Keys moment, it really is. That's kind of the shorthand for the lightbulb moment of, oh, this whole time that I felt like I've never quite blahblah, it wasn't as though I saw I'm like you in that mirror. It was more like, you're different. You're saying why you're different or how you're different in like loudly being like, I am a lesbian and so presenting very differently. And I got to witness that and be like, I have a crush on you. I have like more than a crush on you. And I'm like picking up all the ways in which I have a crush and a lot of it had to do with like, oh, maybe I'm a little bit gay [Laughter] was kind of like how it came together. So that was really the like personal awakening for me of being able to more clearly see my identity. Yeah, well, well, well, baby, little baby at 17. That's why when I hear about kids who are like six and know they're trans or nonbinary or just like nebulous queer, I'm like, that's amazing. Like, I'm so happy for kids, especially kids now like growing up with the internet where like you could go to YouTube or Tumblr or Instagram and just see people and be able to name it. That was like not something available. But there was the L word [Big laugh], which as soon as I came out, I then immediately watched. There was no streaming then. So I binge watched all the DVDs. [Big laugh] That was my lesbian 101 introduction was the L word.

Calzolaio: Did you have a favorite character?

Kerimian: Um, well, like Shane was kind of the archetype of gay in my mind, because Shane kind of loosely resembled the person who I had a crush on slash introduced me to the L word. But I was so annoyed because my crush, who then became my partner eventually, was like, you'll like Jenny because it was like the straight girl who's dating a boy who then meets all these people. And I think it's honestly in like the first or second episode when Jenny is making out with God, what's her name?

Calzolaio: Marina?

Kerimian: Yeah!![Big laughter] In the bathroom, like at a party, and it's this total like, oh my God, this can't be happening, but it's happening. Sorry, there's like street noise.

Calzolaio: So the L Word.

Kerimian: So the L Word. Yeah, so the first queer relationship I was in, and I didn't yet name my queerness, but was in a queer relationship, ostensibly as a straight girl. I was told I would relate to Jenny, and I was so insulted like over the course of this show to see how shitty a character she was. And I was just like, that's not fair. I also really loved Alice because she was like the

bisexual of the show and probably someone that I was most like. That it also didn't have to be the total extreme end of butch femme, Shane to Jenny. So I'm probably good with Alice.

Calzolaio: Um I guess I was wondering if there's anything else you want to say about your childhood because I was going to ask about kind of how you got to New York City.

Kerimian: Sure. I've been like dancing around it a bit, so I guess I'll just spit it out. As I've been like, my partner who introduced me to the L Word, and it's like, well, how did we get there? So kind of the end of that chapter of not knowing to knowing was the friend group I mentioned that I kind of fell in with by default, and then I now no longer have those relationships with. Right at the end of high school, I met this person who was out, and I kind of had a secret relationship in which only a couple of our mutual friends knew about. We'd hang out together and got to like be out only in that specific context. And for being online and very like, you write the initials of who you're dating kind of crap, that's like a way in which it was secret. And so none of my like drama school, high school friends knew about this relationship until the day I put that like coded song lyric and initials and the last party before everyone from high school dispersed to college. And I mentioned earlier, like I never was a drinker or rebellious in that way. None of my friends were. And then this was the first time that like any of them had ever had alcohol before in an unsupervised party. So I show up late. I'm a little like detached and disengaged with these friends at this point because of my relationship. Um but it's still like the goodbye party and I go to enter and a couple of people meet me and they are like do not go in there. It is not safe for you to be in there. And like walk me back out to the street. And I have such a vivid sense memory of sitting on my car, on the trunk of my car having my first cigarette and being told that my ex boyfriend and my at the time best friend found out that I was dating someone queer who has since transitioned which is why I'm like obfuscating their gender. It was relevant at the time and now it's like we're both trans. But a for all intents and purposes same gender relationship. And because they were drunk and because they were assholes and teenagers it became a big joke and it became like the rumor slash discussion and joke of the party. And they were being really mean about me. And I wasn't there to witness it but if people came out to be like don't go in there and I had a big old cry and it was I didn't get to choose to come out. No one else knew like my family didn't know or like teachers or anyone like no one else really knew except for the small group of friends that were on mutuals. And it was really shocking that like my first experience with people knowing I did not consent to. And then I immediately went back into the closet. So I basically entered college hiding the relationship again but hiding my sexuality. Not just not telling people but like feeling a lot of shame and hiding it and not knowing because kind of the joke at that party was like K thinks that they're gay. It's a funny phase and that was part of it was the like that I wasn't gay enough or like lol they're gay now in this like really kind of condescending and like diminishing way. Instead of this like happy I'm exploring this thing for the first time. And it was like a super wholesome like gentle romantic entrance into the relationship. And then I ended it really quickly because I was scared of like my parents finding out. Like people in college finding out it repeated like that event repeating itself. And it's kind of like one of the biggest regrets I have of ending that relationship the way I did because it was like a I can't come out for you. And what it really was that I like reflect on is I couldn't come out for myself. And I know that that must have hurt that

person who was out like when whenever like you hear the that someone's out and dating someone who's not out how how much that can hurt and be really personal to be like I can't hide this thing I'm proud of. Yeah and it took a while for me to get to a place where I was comfortable. So I think that's like a pretty important end to the childhood chapter because that was a pretty defining moment for me in terms of not being able to accept my queerness while also being in it, living it for the first time.

Calzolaio: So from there, how did you get to New York City?

Kerimian: Oh, I avoided it for a while. So from Long Island, that traumatic experience happened on Long Island. And then I immediately took that as a cue of like, these are not my people. But I also didn't know who my people were or where. I just knew, I basically wanted to emotionally run away from that place. I didn't know queer people. I didn't really see queer-affirming spaces. Because Long Island, your like cultural center is Manhattan. But it's not the same thing being a teenager and not being able to just like walk down the block or take a train. Like it's like a two-hour train ride. You know, it's not the same thing as living nearby. So I moved upstate New York to then Buffalo, New York, then down to DC. And between like those three different destinations, that was about 10 years before finally coming back and settling in Brooklyn. So a lot of it was really the like the journey back here that by the time I arrived in Brooklyn again, it was the pandemic lockdown, March, April of 2020. And I right before lockdown was living with someone who I U-Haul'd with. And then we broke up while still living together right before lockdown. And in my panic at like, what do I do? I can't really afford to live on my own. But things were kind of wrapping up in my life in a very natural way. I was like, well, why don't I like store my stuff at my parents' house on Long Island? They're still in my childhood home. And just kind of like travel and not live somewhere for a while. That was my plan in March. And so I still got to like move out of that place. That was not a good place for me to be living. So I didn't have to lock down there. Still put my stuff in my parents' place. And then when the lockdown came, like April, May, June, I was on Long Island. And it was like, despite my parents being accepting of me, the like reminder of being 17. And that was the last time I lived in my parents' house, like flooding back in this way that was like my body didn't feel safe. I didn't have access to community near me. Like my parents' house is like pretty isolated in the suburbs, right? So basically as soon as I could, I moved to Brooklyn to Fort Greene. And only this week did I move to Bed-Stuy. But I've been in Brooklyn. I had to think about what year it was. [Laughter] Three years. Yeah. And it was like an instant, oh, this is where I'm meant to be. And a big part of it is that I've never had so many trans co-workers, neighbors, friends, relationships. Like truly, Brooklyn has been the most gender affirming geographical place. Might also be coincidence of like this time in my life. I don't really think so though because I never saw those people in D.C. I never saw those people in Buffalo. And so I spent all that time kind of avoiding home and avoiding New York and really kind of feeling like I'll find my people someday. And really divorcing myself from the identity of my childhood and then came to Brooklyn and it just like all fell into place of like this is where I was meant to be.

Calzolaio: I just wanted to backtrack a tiny bit and to ask kind of what the queer scene was looking like. I mean I guess you said the trans scene wasn't super visible but kind of what those scenes looked like in the places you moved around and before you came to New York.

Kerimian: Sure. Well I lived in New Paltz where I went to school for a bit. So that was where I was. It's like a tiny college town so there wasn't exactly a queer scene. It was really like students live here. I didn't know too many queer people despite being in a theater department. And there was like a gay bar for...

Calzolaio: Do you remember the name of the bar?

Kerimian: I don't because I never went there because it never felt like an affirming space to me. It very much felt like that's where cishet women go for bachelor parties kind of vibe. Also I like wasn't legal so I didn't do the fake ID college thing. But my first experience with like meeting queer women in college was I was a theater major but I had kind of this contract major with gender studies which was women's studies at the time. It's now gender studies. But I was a part of the feminist collective and it was made up almost entirely of people who at that time identified as women. Can't speak for folks now. And they would have like crunchy granola potlucks on the farm and make like pro-abortion signs to hang up on campus. Um very kind of cottagecore stereotypes. So it was not a party scene at all but it was one of like we care for each other. Consciousness raising vibes. Like that era of like feminism vibes. So it was illuminating to me after being like closeted again like putting myself in the closet again to be like oh this is another way to be queer. And then when I lived in Buffalo and DC I was in a long-term ostensibly hetero relationship with one person. Long-term. So I was with a cishet man for seven years, so covered like a good portion of my adult life or young adult life. We married and then got divorced in like, that's the large chronology of that relationship. But so toward the end of that marriage leading up to the divorce, it was a lot of like, I had come out as non-binary to him at that point. I had started to express my gender differently. My sexuality felt different. Like a lot of these pieces really became loud in my life, took up more space. I was evolving, like I was in therapy. This was when I was like watching all the documentaries and I was on YouTube. Like this was the part where I was like self-educating. I read *The Ethical Slut*. Like this is what that era was. I read *Our Bodies Ourselves*.

Calzolaio: Was there any other like documentaries or books that were particularly influential?

Kerimian: That's when I read *Fun Home*. That's when I read *Sister Outsider*, *The Ethical Slut* I mentioned. I read the book *We Are Everywhere*, which is kind of like a coffee table size, Stonewall and Act Up History primarily. Like that's the era. We Are Everywhere was published by, they started as like an Instagram archival account, LGBT history, which is still active, but they were very much more so before. Then they made this big old book and I read it cover to cover. Like this was the place where I was like absorbing everything. I was probably a better student of my own identity than I ever was like in a classroom. But this is a very wholesome thing. So for a while I was narrating audio books for the Library of Congress when I was living in DC, which was very solitary. I was in a booth with an engineer. That was it. Reading nonfiction, kind of getting randomly assigned books to read. I didn't have say in it. And I was assigned to read a YA queer

history book called *Queer There and Everywhere* by Sarah Prager. And it actually just got re-released in a second edition with updates to include more gender expansive and more global identities. But so that was brand new and I got to narrate it. And so I'm like saying these people's lives and truths out loud, a lot of whom I didn't know about, but also talked quite a bit about gender, gender fluidity, gender nonconforming, especially like we're talking like history, history, like dating back in which this is still the case for queer history. Like "they were close friends, they were roommates." There's not a lot of evidence unless you really try picking up the breadcrumbs for queer history. And so Sarah, the author, did a really lovely job of supplementing without speculating from like, these are the first seats we have basically while also being like we didn't have this language then, maybe this is not the language they would have chosen. And so getting to kind of say all of this out loud and feel like, wow, I don't really get to feel affirmed in my queerness, but this was like a huge moment for me in my performance career where I always had to play like the femme fatale stereotype with like literally a push-up bra and heels. That always made me feel so uncomfortable. And this was right after Trump was elected that I got to read that audiobook and it felt kind of like a fuck yeah moment. So I'd say that book was a catalyst for me finding other resources. Yeah. I actually got to meet the author recently. It was very, very wholesome to be like your book was important to me.

Calzolaio: Mhm and what kind of scenes did you get involved in once you came to New York?

Kerimian: It was still pre-vaccine COVID, so there wasn't a lot of socializing happening. I'm involved in the kink scene and I'm poly, so like the metamor like constellation in polyamory in which multiple of us were like pan, bi, multi-amorous kind of meant there was the pod-ish experience of like we're the people we see because we all are dating each other. So I wasn't like going to kink parties because they weren't happening, but I was getting like that sense of like family and being around each other. And then my other like real social experiences in 2020, like again, where like, you know, it was this hyper vigilance. I'm immunocompromised living in some places where people were anti-mask, you know, that I was really fortunate to work in a place that was predominantly queer staff at the bookstore.

Calzolaio: And so what bookstore were you working at?

Kerimian: This is Greenlight Bookstore right down the block from where I was living. And my roommate who was like a Craigslist roommate sight unseen in the pandemic. Their Craigslist ad said like, I'm queer and disabled and hopefully we have some things in common. And I got to be like, hi, me. So between having like the very limited social interaction of like my roommate who was queer and had their own little queer academic circle, had lived in New York for a long time. And then my like romantic, sexual, like pod sort of relationships, many of whom were new to me because I had just come back to New York. And then all my coworkers who were brand new to me too, each of whom had their own like pre-COVID queer lives. So as vaccines rolled out, as we started to see different waves and like learned that it's okay to be outdoors and those kind of social relationships adapted with the pandemic. I kind of got this like really gentle entry without having to be like, oh, I don't really know people. I don't really know where like the queer places are as someone who like is a transplant much later in like my queer life that I

suddenly had all of these queer and trans people immediately like surrounding me and affirming me who were also like, this is where we go for this and like introducing me to the places that are now what feel like my own and what feel like community to me.

Calzolaio: What could you name some of those places?

Kerimian: Yeah. Riis Beach, the People's Beach at Jacob Riis Park. That was something that I wouldn't have sought out except for people talking about it in this way that it was like a Mecca for queers in New York. And given that I grew up on Long Island, which is known for its beaches, I fucking hated going to the beach because I never felt like I fit in my body. And like the whole thing I said about like the locker room and changing, that's what a bathing suit was to me. Like I could not be in a bathing suit yet didn't know what that was. That might've been a clue. And even before having top surgery or really finding a bathing suit that felt affirming, the first time I went to Reese was like the beginning of the summer in 2021. So like shortly after vaccines rolled out and people started to embrace being outside and socializing. And it was like, this is it. This is where I was meant to be. It was an immediate sense of belonging, of not feeling shame in my body, even if my body wasn't quite mine yet. This idea of like looking around and seeing everyone's top surgery scars and it being like, “yeah, I want to look like that.” And feeling that free and comfortable without it being a party scene. Cause you know, I'm in my thirties. So like I did the drink a lot, dissociating hookup sex, like part of my life. But then I also got to find spaces that to me like queer karaoke at Metropolitan on Tuesdays is like a beloved pastime that like as soon as people felt comfortable being indoors and going to bars without masks, I would corral people and be like, we are going out singing. And like actively choosing. I think the first time that I had like a big group go out with me there that like someone told me about and it was that easy, right? Like finding out about things from just the people who were around me introducing me to places. It's like I got to have the seed planted before going out like in early 2020. And then 2021 got to be like, we have arrived. [Laughter] I'm like thinking about uh the songs that we're singing that were like the obvious anthems sort of thing that was like, yeah, we were all really ready to just be around each other again. And I say we just meaning like the larger queer community. Like it was evident that we missed being around people who affirmed us. And so rather than it feeling like I was new to New York or like what's the scene like, I kind of feel like I lucked out in this way where like no one socialized. So no one who was like new to New York or the past few years, like their social habits changed. We all got to like re-enter just like people call it quote unquote normal life. I feel like since it's still a pandemic, I don't quite agree with that language, but something closer to returning to socializing really in public spaces. I felt like I got to enter something that already felt familiar, even if it was new for me. And that felt really cool to be like, I already take up space in this way that feels like home, that feels like mine. That I never really got to have. Like in DC, there's literally one bar.

Calzolaio: Do you know what the bar is called?

Kerimian: A League of Her Own. And that opened in like the last two years of my time living there.

Calzolaio: Is that a lesbian bar?

Kerimian: Yeah. And it's the basement of a gay male bar, Pitcher's, which was like when we think of gay bars or I'll speak for myself [Laughter] when I think of gay bars, I don't think of it necessarily as a place for me, especially when it's a male dominated space. It's not like the community that I feel the most affirmed by or like if I'm looking to check someone out, it's not where I'm going to meet people. And so like I went to A League of Her Own and I enjoyed it, but it kind of felt like the leftovers, like here are the scraps. It was literally the basement of the male bar that got like the spotlight. Incidentally, since I've left DC, more queer spaces have opened up. As You Are is a place that I only just learned about because I recently read *Moby Dyke* by Krista Burton.

Calzolaio: Is that the like road trip of lesbian bars?

Kerimian: Yeah. And it was a lot of fun to read because she was on this quest for like personal reasons. Like it wasn't because of the book as much as like, well, the book will come out of it. But coming out of COVID was like part of the like slow integration into finding community again after being isolated and went all over the country. And there were like 26, 28 bars. And then the sort of epilogue of the book is like since the like finishing of this manuscript, there have now been X places that have opened up. And that's a good thing. And that's where As You Are was mentioned. And I was like, oh, cool. Like I lived in DC and there weren't these spaces. And now they're much more like genderexpansive, opposed to “this is who this is for and no one else is really welcome” or “unclear” and I appreciate in that book too the author Krista Burton of *Moby Dyke* almost in every interview with the bar owner or the patrons were like “so what does lesbian bar mean now that the word lesbian, the identity of lesbian, and lesbian community is very different than it once was and there are more people who fit into a queer identity or their gender doesn't align” and almost all of them were like we want lesbians to feel welcome here but we want everyone to feel welcome here so they're kind of like becoming a queer umbrella. Yeah, so the queer spaces I feel like and queer scenes from previous places I lived to where I live now have definitely evolved over the course of my own journey, and I feel really lucky that now that I'm like several years out of my divorce and getting to just live my best life and I had top surgery um after like vaccines were rolled out and everything that I feel like the most myself as there's also the like the most representation the most visibility the most awareness and the most like camaraderie and solidarity that I think we've seen in present day yeah

Calzolaio: And how did you get involved in the mutual aid scene with the Bike Project?

Kerimian: Yeah um it evolved from multiple influences, but something that we were seeing a lot of early COVID, largely out of resistance and uprising in response to George Floyd's murder was how we can take care of each other while still being safe during a pandemic um but also like make voices heard and support each other. A lot of people I knew who weren't previously active like in politics or activism or community care suddenly became so got involved in collectives that like taught each other like good practices for protests so I was like- we all were basically witnessing that across the country and then eventually globally with COVID there were a lot of people like right they overlap the Venn diagram in terms of the chronology is there but they kind of were running parallel to each other, so a lot of people who like didn't know where testing sites were like everyone on Instagram was putting all these resources out of like; here's

an accessible place for testing here's where the lines are shorter if you don't have masks here's where you can get them for free like I just started seeing way more public sharing of resources. And with a lot of crowdfunding, like a lot of businesses were in that like, we need your help or we're going to close. Bluestockings is a staple of New York queer culture bookstore community space cafe. They made the choice for accessibility reasons, but also rent to move their location, their longtime location. And that's an example of like they went the like membership crowdfunding route of like, yeah, it's a pandemic. We're not making money. And if we want to survive this, we need your help. But just the mantra of we need your help. I feel like I've never seen so many people, not just queer people, like truly everywhere of people saying, how can I help? And I want to help and not just the like thoughts and prayers help, but what are actionable steps I can take? A lot of people were suddenly illuminated to racism in this country and anti racist practices. It was an election year. Like there was so much going on in 2020. Right. That for all that turbulence, I feel like it also really kicked up a lot of people's anger that turned into like spite against the powers that be. Like if our government isn't going to provide assistance for the most vulnerable communities, like especially in New York, where there was not the care that needed to be provided in further reaches of New York, like the neighborhoods basically that were furthest out got the least care. The whole like stipend that was released early on government assistance wasn't based on how many members were in your household. So like I as an individual who doesn't I don't have any dependents received the same amount of money as like a whole ass family trying to make their rent like the disproportionate quote unquote assistance from the government didn't allow for equity. And so I as someone who had the privilege of housing, like I was staying with my parents for free in this like weird window of my life, didn't have to worry about paying bills like that, like I had been for 10 years meant I was putting like my government assistance money directly into like I knew a ton of bookstores that were like it was imminent that they were going to close unless they received assistance. Lots of people who were like, I was about to get top surgery and now I can't go to the hospital. I can't pick up my tea like I need to like I got kicked out of housing like a lot of these like crises emergency responses too. And so the redistribution of funds I feel like is a classic example of mutual aid, but it's also very much I feel like the joke of it is like an example is if you've ever worked in a restaurant, even if you are poor you will tip better than people who have that disposable income. It's the classic like the people who do not actually have the disposable income because they also need community care will give away their money to others who need it in that moment, even though they're probably going to need it soon too. And it's I think it's a it's not really a cycle in that like linear way or transactional way. I think it is really a we take care of each other and trust that when someone else needs help and asks for it, that the community will come together. And so by taking care of the people around you when it's your turn kind of thing. And that from spoon theory of like disability culture.

Calzolaio: Could you briefly explain?

Kerimian: Yeah. I don't remember now the person's name who coined spoon theory with that example. Sorry, but if you if you look on Wikipedia, I know she's credited. But I believe she had lupus. And in the anecdote in which it came up was out to dinner with a friend who was not disabled, who was kind of like, what's it like to have lupus? Just a day in the life. And this person

who coined spoon theory or the name of it used the example of utensils at the table they were at and they were taking away a piece of silverware for every like, this is what it physically and emotionally and mentally costs me. So when I take a shower, take away a spoon. Like when I go grocery shopping, take away a spoon. And with that was like, this is how many spoons I have left and it's two maybe. To then do everything else I need to do. And so the spoons were the physical representation, the metaphor of energy, I guess. But in a lot of different ways that disabled people are at the disadvantage, they have fewer spoons to start with. Whereas abled people have a full silverware drawer. And so it doesn't cost as much for them because they don't drain their resources basically, whether that's physical, emotional, mental, financial. And so it is disproportionately that queer and trans and intersectionally queer and black, brown, disabled, like all the intersections of queerness, but marginalized identities disproportionately have lower income and have fewer resources like access to resources, largely healthcare. And so those expenses, it can be like a really traumatic cycle, but also have substance abuse issues, have mental health issues. And I speak of this in like the broad sweep, but there are statistics, that I can't quote offhand to back it up. For my own experience, I'm a person who has mental illness and a physical disability in which I'm sometimes rendered disabled. I have arthritis. So sometimes I'm able-bodied and then sometimes I am incapacitated and use a mobility aid. So it's kind of like "sometimes I have more spoons and sometimes I don't." And that's where thinking about like who needs care at a given time, like spoon theory came to mind of like, that's a lot of how community care works, how mutual aid works is like the people who have time and energy and initiative or maybe they're white and use their privilege in a space so that if they're taking up space in a public park so that anyone of any identity can come and receive a hot meal that the cops won't show up because they see a group of Black people congregating for services, for free services, and like there's nothing wrong with the way in which that gathering is taking place. But it is safer and like the white people there serve as that protective barrier against cops as an example of just like the cops don't take care of us. The safest communities are the ones that have not more cops but more resources. Race to me is like the most obvious example of solidarity and using your privilege um. But also in response to a lot of what's going on in the country right now with anti-trans legislation and health care for youth and like the banning of books, a lot of that is we need cis people, we need hetero people, we need cis people who are gay but maybe they're white, like talking about those people who have more privilege in whatever way to be loud, to advocate, to be that barrier because like in the era of fighting for marriage equality, which feels like so long ago but it wasn't, right? It was made legal in 2013. A lot of government officials, senators, members of Congress were very staunchly like anti-gay and anti-marriage equality, but then their son came out as gay and then suddenly their mind was changed and it was about knowing someone, right? And that's part of the visibility. It's not always safe for people to be visible, right? If I was in Florida right now, it would not be safe for me. I'm really fortunate that I benefit from where I live, right? You were talking about for the first time being surrounded by queer and trans people more so than ever, I'm in Brooklyn. Like that is a privilege geographically, right? When people are like just move to people who live in rural or secluded areas or areas that are largely unwelcoming. It's like that is a privilege to imply someone can just pick up and go. Not everyone can do that or seek out community and ask for help or be out, right? So even just getting to be out and feel safe is a

privilege. So the book bike evolved from seeing how people were pivoting in 2020, right? Like a lot of businesses found ways to be online or to do delivery or no contact. So things were changing. I came from a bookselling background working in physical brick and mortars. Suddenly didn't have that, right? Like it shut down. And I was back home on Long Island where there aren't bookstores or at least so few that there are none near where I grew up. And I was really missing that as like that was my third place. That was where I felt most myself. And I was like, damn, what if I could bring books to people? Because right now kids are all being virtually schooled. Like the library wasn't open. The public library wasn't open.[Incredulous] You could not get books. And while people were struggling to get toilet paper and groceries safely, entertainment was a huge part of how we like mentally survived those early months. Like what would we fucking have done without streaming services was like a big part of how people survived emotionally through that period. And many people still who are disabled and immunocompromised and not able to leave the house, we've adapted to work from home. So some things have pivoted and quote unquote returned to normal. Some things adapted for the better. And so, you know, bookstores reopened and slowly evolved toward the what we were before. But what we were before doesn't always serve where we are now. Right. The kind of like, well, that's the way it's always been is not really a good argument for anything. And so I think a lot of the things I didn't really think about before became very present in the privilege of being able to afford books to go to bookstores. Right. I work in a bookstore in Brooklyn. It's a new bookstore. So just like it's cost prohibitive to some people just on the basis of not everyone can afford a book. Books are expensive. And if they're all new and that's not a fault of that store. But I was working in that environment and got to see it every day. Right. Like that was a part of it is it was like the world I was occupying and the world was very small at the time in that bubble. And then people who don't live near a bookstore don't get that and then need books shipped to them. Like just really like where are the books? And then also thinking of like how many queer kids maybe need a parent to take them to a store or a library, but it might not be safe for them to ask for help or take that book home in front of their parent depending on their home life. Or maybe they're not with a parent and it's unsafe. Maybe they're very free to be themselves, but they're shy and they like don't want to ask someone for help finding a queer book. That became like an immediate thing for me where in lockdown, suddenly just with my parents, I wasn't being affirmed every day. I was being misgendered and dead named by my parents. Not intentionally, but because they like really didn't get it. And it's a work in progress and we're slowly making our way there. But all I was hearing, right? These were the only people I was having physical interaction with every day during that lockdown. So then later in the year working at the bookstore surrounded by queer people with access to books, I'm working so I have more means at this time. It was really reflecting on how isolating it was to not have those resources and to not be affirmed during lockdown. And realizing that's probably closer to a lot of people's experiences, not on like liberal coast cities in the States. And so while a bike can only get so many places, it was really like, what if I brought books to people who can't get to bookstores? What if those books were not at the cost of a new book? And it like evolved for a while where I was like, what if they're used books or right? Like I didn't quite have the full picture of it that I was like, what if I get a van was part of it. And so it would still be limited geographically, but there are plenty of places in Brooklyn, you know, kind of in the further

reaches you go, the further out from the nucleus of any place are really where there's less resources. So working in a physical retail space where there was really like no true answer when there's a bottom line. And then seeing the effects of the positive effects of mutual aid during COVID, a lot of things just collided in this really magical way that it really kind of came not from nowhere, but from a place of like the right time. It was the right time for it. My gender being one of them, right? Like feeling like, wow, I'm really like in my body and in my identity. But the idea and the project really started on my birthday last year. I turned 34 in October. And for a lot of trans people, reaching a certain age, and that was the age for me, is like, wow, I can't believe I'm still here. So 34 was kind of the like, I didn't think I'd make it this far. And so rather than it being this like morbid day of mourning, it was like, oh shit, I never got to think about a future. Like I was always kind of living with this ticking clock in my head of like, "something might happen. Don't get your hopes up." That was really it. I'm like, don't get your hopes up. Don't think too far about a future. So literally on my birthday, I just posted like my personal Instagram. I was like, hey, instead of getting me things, buy a book for this thing I'm going to start. And like truly came up with this, like I'm going to do a project. And then someone I know, a friend of mine, bought a book from this list of suggestions I made. It was *Juliet Takes a Breath* by Gabby Rivera. That was like the first book. And so it was like, "oh, someone did it. That's awesome." And like it started with a book is like a very simple thing. It didn't start there, right? It coalesced from all of these other things. But so then it was like, okay, a bike doesn't have to deal with permits and the limitations of like not being able to park or bridges and tolls. Like the bike was like, it's the most eco-friendly and responsible way to care for the environment. But I can still go places and cart books. And then the fact that one person heard the call of like, don't get me something, buy a book and did. I was like, there's a way to get books that I don't need to like go into business to get it. And a lot of people very early on when I was talking about how this idea was going to happen, were like, so it's a nonprofit. And I like really insisted, no, it isn't. Because I have a little bit of experience with nonprofit. And at the end of the day, you still have to answer to your taxes[Laughter]. Like there's I went to a book conference earlier this year and the executive director of a queer bookstore and community space in I think Atlanta, Georgia. I know Georgia, but I think Atlanta said on a panel about nonprofits where I was like, do I want this to be a nonprofit? It was like the difference between for profit and nonprofit is like capitalism versus the good guys. It's we both have to file taxes. It's a different way to file your taxes. There is no good guy. And this was a trans man saying this who really believes in the work he's doing. And it's a nonprofit bookstore. And it wasn't a condemnation of either. It was just like understand that nonprofit isn't the magical solution either. You're still going to be met with red tape and there is still a bottom line. And hitting the age I hit and seeing the way people could ask for help and receive help in whatever way they could give. Then I started saying, anyone who literally has any books they want to purge, like you today gave me a copy from your personal library, and that was your choice. And if it came from your personal library, it may at one point have cost you something, but today it didn't. And that'll go to someone now. And I think that's really special that every book that winds up on the bike, someone either purchased for the bike because they had the means to do so, like my parents bought from a wishlist, because they had the means to do so. They're not at the intersection of marginalized identities. They have the financial privilege at this point in their lives. Or authors, publishers, the authors,

it's very sweet to me that they're like, here's my book. But from working in the book industry, I have a lot of connections from book people saying, here are books, advanced reader copies, or other people just around who were like, I have books, can I give you books? I have too many books, like classic. So the people who maybe can't buy a book are giving their own books. In fact, several outings I've done so far with the bike, there are people who saw me the first time and then the second time I was at that same location, brought a bag of books to me to be like, I looked through what I had and I would like to give these to you. So you know the model of community care and mutual aid of the we take care of each other when we are able to, right? The people who give money because they can afford to, that is a way in which they care. If they have a larger platform and so they're able to boost us because we're much smaller, that's been a big part of how we've built communities, making relationships with other organizations. And not just in Brooklyn. I'm so surprised. We've had people from all over the country. Someone in Hawaii was like, I'd like a sticker. Can you mail it to me? And I was like, sure. You're in Hawaii? What? But that's the power of the internet. And so it's really grown from people who have different connections, communities, being able to boost each other. That is an important way to offer care and aid to a new project that relies on community support. The bike itself, which was custom built, like obviously the biggest expense and it couldn't be the Nonbinarian Book Bike without the book bike. And it was entirely community funded. So those funds came from people who made the choice to contribute. I didn't really do the crowdfund like big push until I was like, hey, if we want to make this happen near Pride, kind of need to get there. And it was with that last like quarter of the money needed kind of thing. But up till then it was kind of through passive revenue streams of like if someone bought a book from the bookshop page, the tiny little affiliate fee went to the book bike fund. Like if you bought custom merch, the affiliate fee went there. There's a Ko-Fi page. And so if you did like a $1 a month subscription, like things like that were how funds were being built since my birthday is like kind of where it started. Instagram's wild because that's really how so many people like the bookstagrammers have found it, authors have found it. And you know, we were talking earlier of using the internet to find queer culture. There's a lot of people who use social media now and wherever it evolves to find that community. Like a lot of people who we did a giveaway of the book club book, every winner were from different states. There was someone in Oregon, someone in Illinois, someone in Texas. There was the person I mentioned, one with the sticker in Honolulu, like there's someone in New Zealand [Laughter]. Like truly the reaches of the internet, it's much bigger than Brooklyn, which is really a surprise to me in a good way because like, you know, the bike being limited, we have a virtual book club for that reason. And it's to bring people in from wherever, if that's the only way in which they can find community or if it's just because we're phasing out virtual programming and people still need access to programming and community to provide it in any way. Yeah. Yeah. That's a whole lot of rambly stuff, but there's a lot I could say about how it's come together because it took many more people than me to make it happen. I was just kind of the person like on my birthday, on the day in which I didn't really think like, wow, I'd make it to this age. I was able to envision a future and that was the future I wanted. And it was no longer about like, gee, I'd like to own a bookstore someday. It was more like, I'm going to make this happen now because no one's going to hand it to me. And I suddenly had a sense of

urgency and an idea of how to make it happen. And then other people helped make it happen is like a huge part of it. Yeah.

Calzolaio: What neighborhoods have you been to so far?

Kerimian: Oh, gosh. We have been to the Prospect Lefferts Gardens neighborhood, Bushwick, Bed-Stuy, Fort Greene, Kerimianensington, and the west side of Prospect Park near the Lafayette Memorial. That was like a pit stop for a fun collaboration earlier this week, actually, for a queer and trans social bike ride. They meet weekly and that's their meeting point. So I literally went there to be like, hi, I don't know any of you. Who wants to bike this someday. So that was our most recent outing. Yeah, and it truly, like, the bike only started getting out for outings because the bike arrived the second week of July. So it, like, isn't even a month old in the physical form of distributing books. Yeah, so we haven't done a lot yet, but it also feels like we've done a lot considering how young the actual bike is.

Calzolaio: And were you looking at any other similar projects? I know you mentioned kind of other mutual aid efforts, but did you see anything specifically with book distribution that was inspiration for the book bike?

Kerimian: For no particular reason back in 2019, working in a bookstore in which when we had idle time, we were encouraged to, like, further our book knowledge by just, like, using the computer and reading about books coming up or book industry news, like things like that. So somewhere in that kind of, like, idle space, I was like, do bookmobiles exist? Like, that's where it started. And I started Googling and doing research and, like, looking and yeah, they exist and they also are, like, a historic thing. Not just of library systems, but that's a big one of, like, bringing books in regional locations to rural areas since there tends to be fewer libraries in a district the further out you go. And then in that kind of, like, abstract way, I stumbled upon the company that makes the book bike that we eventually got. So I had somewhere along the lines was like, I wonder if there's, like, an ice cream bike because I've seen those where it's, like, the cooler and just it's a regular ass bike otherwise. I wonder if there's an ice cream bike version of a book bike. That's how I found them was I was like, ice cream bike, book bike? And so this company, Icicle Tricycles, which build ice cream bikes and, like, cooler insulated, they have, like, beer taps, coffee, etc. They started doing book bikes not that long ago and it's the same, like, frame design for the, it's a tricycle, not a bike, but book bike sounds better. With shelves and the way it, like, folds in and folds out. So it was like, yes, that's it. That's what it is. So it kind of was in this periphery of, like, I had sort of loosely done research without really intending it to manifest into something. It was a curiosity, but also because I think, like many people in the book industry, you're like, maybe someday I'll own a bookstore. It was like, yeah, maybe someday I'm probably not going to be able to afford rent on or, like, a storefront for a business, but maybe I can do a book bike. I don't have to pay rent on it. [Laughter]

Calzolaio: And I know we don't have that much time left, so I just have a few last questions. I was just wondering what it's like also to run this kind of in an era where Amazon and booksellers like that are dominating the book front. Yeah, and so what it's been like to organize in a more community-oriented way around books.

Kerimian: For sure. Working in indie books, there's a lot of that anti-Amazon attitude already. Like people shop at indie stores because they want to support indie. So I'm fortunate that I've had that culture around me in my work setting for several years and that a lot of the booksellers and people who work in the book industry don't shop at Amazon either. Like we as, like, you know, we're small in terms of the behemoth that is Amazon, but we're united in like anything but Amazon. A couple years ago, there was a national campaign run that was like a don't box out indies and they all had like the same kind of assets to display that looked like Amazon boxes to put in the storefront windows. And it was like a billionaire doesn't need your help. Buy books from people who aren't trying to go to space. I'm saying that in like a much less eloquent way than the marketing campaign. I'm clearly not a marketing person. But I loved it because it was like, fuck yeah, don't, he doesn't fucking need your help. Many people I know because I come from the book industry don't shop on Amazon, like period. I myself don't. I also recognize where Amazon is cheap. And we were talking about plenty of things earlier about class and geographical location. And for some people that is the only resource they have. And it is a way in which they can still get books and literacy is important to me. I won't condemn people shopping on Amazon if it is like the only way they can get books. But it also doesn't help the authors really. It doesn't really help the community because the reason Amazon can sell their books for so cheap is because they're cutting down the prices and selling it that cheap because they have this massive company that makes money in so many ways that who are they really serving? Like it's not serving the community, the book industry, the author, the publisher. Sure, it looks nice to be on like a bestseller list. I don't think any author would complain about that. But I think there's an active effort in resisting Amazon, especially if we've seen labor unions forming and strikes and more people talking about the behind the scenes of being overworked and the warehouse conditions and things like that. When I have told people how they can donate, there's a section on the website and on our respective social medias of all the places they can get books. So whether it's donating from things they have, because like recycling books amongst each other, like rather than them going to the garbage, [Laughter] like give them a good home. I think a lot of people like knowing that their books are going somewhere, like they like knowing who it's going to. Or buying it from bookshop.org, which is basically the independent bookstore, like larger networks version, answer to Amazon, right? Like there is nothing to compete with Amazon, right? Amazon's going to be Amazon with or without book sales. Like they run everything, especially during COVID when so many people needed to order shit online. Like it makes sense. I know me not having an Amazon membership doesn't really do anything to them.[Laughter] It doesn't really affect them. But bookshop.org only started several years ago. And since then has totally expanded in this really wonderful way because they give a good portion of what they earn back to individual stores. So you can choose a store to sponsor, basically. So if you were like, I want to support that tiny queer bookshop in Wisconsin that doesn't have a website to give them money and it takes the labor off of them because it comes from like the warehouse, like independent bookstore's warehouse, not Amazon. So because there wasn't any way to avoid Amazon for new books, like this is a way. Unfortunately, it's still going to be cost prohibitive for many people because their new book prices largely. And so there's also partner wishlists through stores. P&T Knitwear in the Lower East Side in Manhattan is one of our partners. And they have remaindered books and used books and a lot of sales on

their books. And so that's a way in which like if I'm directing people to different ways to buy books, I feel good about like if you have money, you want to spend like or can spend. I'm not forcing you to buy a book a specific way. There is language that says do not buy books from Amazon to donate to the bike. I can't entirely control like where people are getting their books, but we are at least trying to communicate that that's not what we personally want in our community. And there are alternatives if you want to buy a really cheap used books. I will always try to buy new if the author is living because we want to show the publishing industry that there's a demand for queer books and trans authors. That's an important signal to the industry. But if the author's dead, I'm like, well, they don't need those sales now, and I'll get it used, generally. And there's websites like biblio.com and thriftbooks that are not affiliated with Amazon that you can buy books really cheap. And so if it's about cost, if it's about shipping, if it's about where you live, not having bookstores nearby, those are answers. And I really believe in the library system. I think it's really incredible now with the fact that they have apps and that you can get audiobooks for free. There's a lot of really cool things happening out there now that we've figured out how to use technology to our advantage as opposed to like, I remember when e-readers were invented, basically working at borders, and we were like, they're going to put us out of business. They'll never print books on paper again. People have their e-readers, so it's a thing. But we've also figured out how to provide literacy services through the library. You can get your e-books for free on a loan system. There are resources to get books to people that are not Amazon. Yeah.

Calzolaio: Are there any kind of plans for the future that you have with the book bike?

Kerimian: I'd love to see it grow to a point that we're able to go to more places. So right now, just starting out means we haven't been able to go out a lot, but also I'm the one biking it right now, whereas we have a bunch of people who do behind-the-scenes stuff with inventory and social media and the book club and the newsletter, stuff like that. I'm the one cycling it, and until we get more cyclists, we can't get it out as much. So I'd love for the bike to A, be out more, B, go to more places. Like I mentioned, I have a disability that sometimes renders me physically disabled. It means I'm probably not biking to Bay Ridge, you know? But if there are other people who are able to and we can divide that labor, we can get the bike out to more neighborhoods that do not have bookstores. Like that's really the ultimate goal, is to reach the book deserts. It's great that I'm going to be able to go to Fort Greene. There's already a bookstore there, right? That's why I am interested in meeting partners like the other night talking about the social ride we did the other night, because it was like, this is a whole community of trans people I didn't know, some of whom might want to ride the bike someday. But also, many of them were like, oh, I'm a part of this project. Have you heard of this? Yeah, I know this business. They'd be great to partner with.

That is like the future I want is that we build those relationships to a point where we are integrated into the community. The novelty is very helpful right now. And people are finding out about it right now because they're seeing it, which is very exciting. I'd love for the future of it to be sustainable. So, you know, I don't know how sustainable it can reasonably be when we're relying on just donations from people from their personal libraries. Like maybe we will need to

build funds to buy books. Like I don't know how sustainable it'll be using all the same models of like I volunteer my time to bike the bike. You know, what if I have a flare up and I can't at all? So those partner relationships and building the community outside of like my immediate circle are going to be crucial to the longevity of the project.

Calzolaio: Yeah. Is there anything else that you wanted to add generally?

Kerimian: About the bike or about myself or ...

Calzolaio: Just as- I guess as a way to close the interview [Laughter] if there's anything else.

Kerimian: I wanted to ask how you found me because I thought you reaching out to ask for an interview was like, oh, I'm like trans famous because I went to the Oral History Project's website and saw some of the people who were interviewed. Like Miss Majors in the archive. And I was like, holy shit, this is like the who's who of like New York trans people. And I feel very much like little old me with this project. So I feel really honored. That's why it's like special when you were thanking me for doing this. I'm like, thank you for reaching out to me.

Calzolaio: Yeah, I found you through the Blue Stockings Instagram page.

Kerimian: Heck yeah! See, that's what I'm talking about. But like that right there is like a direct relationship building.

Calzolaio: Yeah.

Kerimian: Yeah

Calzolaio: Well, thank you for your time.

Kerimian: Yeah, thank you.