

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

JULIAN TALAMANTEZ BROLASKI

Interviewer: Lewis:

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the future.

AJ Lewis: Uh, hello. My name is AJ Lewis, and I'll be having a conversation with Julian Talamantez Brolaski for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. Uh, this is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It's March 24, 2017, um, and this is being recorded at the New York Public Library in Midtown. Hello.

Julian Talamantez Brolawski: Hi, AJ.

Lewis: Uh, can you just say, tell us your name, your age, gender, gender pronouns?

Brolawski: Uh, my name is Julian Talamantez Brolaski. Um, I'm 38. Gender pronouns is a long story, um, and I don't know how to answer that straightforwardly. I prefer to use gender neutral pronouns. I've often used male pronouns. I grew up having female pronouns applied to me. Um, for a long time I tried to use xe as a pronoun, X E, and I kind of invented or, like, cobbled together a pronoun paradigm based on that, like xe, xir, xemself, you know, like a lot of people have used xe and hir and things like that, or ze, Z E, but I liked the X E, I thought it looked cool, and I was studying medieval literature and I learned that she as a pronoun didn't really come into major use until the 1400s, and, you know, really after the printing press in 1450. And so I realized there were all these, that there was a history in the English language of pronouns that were ambiguous. Like, in old English there was hīe and hēo and hīe could mean he or she. So anyway, I tried to use xe and get people to use it, but it wasn't fully successful and it seemed like people were much more comfortable using "he," um, and so they did. Um, and, so I kind of gave up on that, though it still is something that I use in writing, and it seems like as of this moment, in 2017, they as a gender neutral pronoun is becoming much more normalized and widely used. So they is great. Um, I like, personally for me, I like "it" as a pronoun. And I don't know, this might be controversial, um, because people will say like, oh, it's degrading or whatever, but I think that it is beautiful because it's sort of like a great leveler. Like, I'm it, the wastebasket is it, the lampshade is it, the animals are it, and I — it is what I tend to prefer, but I notice that it, people are uncomfortable using it for that reason.

Lewis: Mm-hmm.

Brolawski: Because they don't want to be insulting. Even though I've said that that's what I want.

Lewis: Yeah, that's interesting.

Brolawski: The last few times people have asked me my pronoun preference in a public way and I told them it, and I'm not kidding, um, they avoided the use of pronouns. So that was interesting.

Lewis: That is interesting. I'm going to ask you more about humans and relations with humans and non-humans and other things later, but, um —

Brolawski: Okay.

Lewis: Can you describe your gender as you experience it now?

Brolawski: Sure, I can try. Um, I -- my gender feels multiple. I, you know, identify I guess as a two spirit person, and also like a non-binary person, though all of these terms are unsatisfying in different ways. As you know very well, we're often forced to choose one or the other. Like even just now, before this interview, there's binary bathrooms in this building, and I was asked which one I wanted to use, and I said the men's room, and that's the one that I use if I have to choose. So for practicality's sake, and for the sake of filling out forms and for legal things, I'm male and I'm legally male. But I — and I have, I guess, what you would call like a male presentation, but I don't identify as a man. And in my gender, it's androgynous.

Lewis: Awesome. Um, can you tell me a little bit about like, where you're from? Where you grew up?

Brolawski: Yeah, um, I'm from a town called Encinitas, which is in San Diego County, and I grew up there. It's a beach town, and I ran away from home when I was 16 and came to the Bay Area. First to Santa Cruz and then to Oakland and Berkley and the East Bay. Um, yeah, so that was where I grew up.

Lewis: Do you have like, a family of origin that you were close to as a child or thereafter?

Brolawski: Uh, I'm an only child and, but I have a lot of cousins and extended family. Um, I spent a lot of time in the summer in the Mescalero Reservation in New Mexico, um, but I mainly grew up in San Diego until I was, like, a teenager, and then the Bay Area, which is sort of where I grew up as a writer. So like, the Bay Area kind of feels more like my home than southern California does. I don't know if you've ever been to San Diego, but it's kind of a racist and queerphobic place.

Lewis: Is that why you decided to leave?

Brolawski: Yeah. I mean, partially, but more particularly it was because my parents were not okay with me being queer, so that was why I left.

Lewis: But did you have like — what were the most important relationships for you when you were either a child or in early adulthood?

Brolawski: I was a really, like, lonely, like melancholy child. I didn't have a lot of friends. Um, so I would say you know, but growing up my most important person, and I would say the person who is still the most important to me is my grandmother, um, and she was the first person in my family who really understood my queerness, not only in terms of my sexuality, but like also my transness, and you know, she still has to like, explain it to family members, and you know, she's also a poet and a scholar like I am, so we kind of connect in that way. So I'd say she was like, the most important person to me as a child and as an adult. And then I really didn't, you know, start

to have meaningful social relationships until I was like, in my late teens. I was really like, kind of a loner as a young person, just like, terribly shy and, um, introverted.

Lewis: Okay. What kind of things were you interested in, like, as a kid?

Brolawski: As a kid?

Lewis: Mm-hmm.

Brolawski: Um, music and surfing. Yeah, my dad, and actually all of my dad's family are surfers, and he taught me how to surf and — like all my aunts and uncles on that side of the family. And they were really sweet like, you know, even when I was like, too small to paddle out, like my uncles would let me like, hold onto their ankles and they would like, paddle me out into the ocean. I loved to swim. I learned to swim before I learned to walk, and I just grew up basically in the water. And I loved music, too. Um, my dad was an is a piano teacher, so I grew up kind of playing classical music. Um, but then like, when I started to become like, an agitated adolescent, I was like, this is stupid, you know, like, I don't — I didn't want to take lessons from him anymore. I wanted, like, a different teacher, but we were really poor so, like, they couldn't afford that, and so I stopped playing piano. And I would kind of like secretly play, but I stopped taking lessons from him when I was like, 11 or 12. And I didn't play music like, all through my teenage years. Until I was like, 19 and I discovered, um, country music. Yeah.

Lewis: Were there, like, communities that you were a part of as a kid?

Brolawski: Yeah, um, I mean, it was really hard to find queer people, um, once I sort of figured out that I was one, um, in my junior high school or like, in my high school, there wasn't really any. There was like this kind of trend of like, in my high school like, girls who were bisexual that like, had boyfriends, you know? That was like, it was kind of like the trendy thing to be bisexual, but no one seemed like, I don't know — which is not to say that they weren't, but um, they weren't like, at risk visibly in the same way that like, I was, or like, visibly — there weren't really visibly queer people. Um, but I had this other friend who was gay, and she, like, you know, discovered that there was this, like, gay and queer youth group in, um, Hillcrest, which is like the gay part of San Diego. And so we would like, take the bus down there, and we like, you know, met these other like, gay kids, and, um — but I didn't have a car. It was so far away. Like, it didn't really feel like a community, but it was like, it was a revolution in that like, people existed who were like — and they happened also to be like, really cool people, too. Um, so that was like, the one, like, taste of that that I got as like a tween or like a young person. But it wasn't really until I came to Santa Cruz um as an undergrad and then to like the Bay Area that, you know, I discovered there were like, you know, groups of like indigenous people and groups of like queer people who were like, you know, excited about bonding together.

Lewis: So you went to the — how old were you when you went to the Bay Area?

Brolawski: I was 16 when I went to Santa Cruz, yeah.

Lewis: And what was that like?

Brolawski: It was really cool. Like, it was like, it rained. Like, I don't think it rained like, most of my childhood. You know, it was like intense drought in San Diego. So, I don't know if you've ever been to Santa Cruz, but it's like, not only is it on the beach, but there's like, redwoods, and it's like, a really beautiful microclimate. They call it the banana belt, because it's like also sunny, but it rains, and so I was like, oh my God, there's like, green plants, and like, people of different colors, and like, people of different genders, you know, sexualities, and it just seemed — and like, artists, and like, cool bands, like, came through town, and it was just like — to me it was just like a flowering of humanity and nature, and it was so refreshing after San Diego.

Lewis: Can you tell me about a memory that stands out from when you first arrived in this new place?

Brolawski: Oh, when I first arrived in Santa Cruz, um, I remember like, I had actually gone to visit Santa Cruz with my best friend at the time, who is a little bit older than me, he was like, 19, and I was 15 or 16, and he was like, looking at schools to transfer to. And so we went up to Santa Cruz to visit, and I just remember like, we went to a screening of Reservoir Dogs. I think it's Reservoir Dogs, the Tarantino film where there's like, at one point someone has like, a Banana Slugs t-shirt on which is the mascot of Santa Cruz [Pulp Fiction - C.A.], which is so awesome because the banana slug is like, a hermaphroditic slug [laughs], it's like the opposite of what you would want as a sports mascot. So it just shows how like —

Lewis: True. [Laughs.]

Brolawski: How anti- all of that they are. There's like, no Greek system at Santa Cruz or anything. Um, I just remember being in the like, bathroom before we, like, went to see the movie on campus, and like, there was like graffiti about like, that had like, there were like Marx quotes and poetry and like, you know, radical political statements, and I was like oh my God, like, this graffiti is so smart. Like, everyone is so smart and cool here. [Laughs.] And so when he decided to go there, that was, you know, around the time that I had like, ran away from home, and I was like, I'm just going to come with you. Um, so I came with him to Santa Cruz and, you know, I was really lucky because I was, like, I had good grades, I was like, a good student, like, despite you know, being — having a lot of like, social problems around like, being a queer kid. So I was able somehow to like, talk my way into school. So instead of being on the streets like I might have been, hustling or whatever, like, I was able to start school early. And I wrote this letter to the administration about how I was like, oppressed, and like, it was true, but it was like, you know. And how I should be admitted early. And my aunt Maria was a re-entry student there with my cousins, her three boys, and she was living on campus and she was like — she knew someone in the administration office and she was like, talk to this person, and the person was like, you need to write a letter, and like — so somehow it just like, all fell together that I was able to start my schooling, and it was like, a real blessing because I, you know, you and I are both well-aware of how like, when

people like us, like, run away from home, they often end up in really precarious situations. So I was really blessed in that regard.

Lewis: What did you tell them about how you were oppressed?

Brolawski: I told them that like, my um parents were homophobic and that I had to leave home and — but that I was like, a really good student and they should let me in to their program. And so there was something, I don't know. Somehow I got it together like you have to be 18 to take the GED but there's something called the California High School Proficiency exam that you only have to be 16 to take, and so I took that, and there was something called early admissions under special circumstances, and so that was how that occurred,

Lewis: You mentioned, like, having social problems attendant to being a queer kid and sort of figuring that out and going to school. Can you tell me a little bit what that was like?

Brolawski: Uh, yeah, um. You know, I was just like, verbally harassed a lot for not looking like how I was supposed to look, you know? I was called a lot of names. I was, like, you know, confronted physically a couple times, and yeah, it just wasn't, like it didn't feel safe, you know? To even like, be a person walking down the hall, like let alone like a person that could function socially with like friends who could like date people, and you know what I mean? So it just caused me to be really, um, even more insular than I already was.

Lewis: Did you like being in school?

Brolawski: In high school?

Lewis: Uh, once you started, uh, college.

Brolawski: Oh, yeah, I mean, it was sort of like, yeah, it was like a safety net, culturally and intellectually, and you know, I could take poetry classes and, you know, and I was really interested in literature, so yeah, I liked it. I can't say that I, like, worked that hard, but I liked being in that environment. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't, like, have any skills, you know?

Lewis: How long were you in school for?

Brolawski: Uh, I was in school — how long was I in school at Santa Cruz? I was there from '95 to '99. And then I moved to Berkley, and, um, did an MFA at Mills from '99 to 2001. And then I worked for a year or two, and then I started grad school again at Berkley in 2003 to 2006, and that's when I moved to New York.

Lewis: And that was the PhD.

Brolawski: Mm-hmm.

Lewis: Were there like, relationships or communities that were especially important to you in the Bay Area?

Brolawski: Yeah, um, yeah. There was like — it was like the Bay Area where, when I moved to the Bay Area proper that I first heard about there being poets. Like people who were poets in the world. Like, I had been writing poetry since I was a kid, but for some reason I just thought like, poetry was like this thing from the 19th century that like, people didn't really do anymore. Like people may have like, may write poems and put them in a drawer, but I didn't think it was a really thing that you could be in through world anymore. I know that sounds like terribly naïve but I really didn't think it was a thing. And I remember when I first moved to Berkley, I met this friend of a friend in a record shop and he was like, oh yeah, like, the experimental poetry community in San Francisco, and I was like, what? Like, there's a poetry community? Like, it just like blew my mind open, and then I started like, going to readings and meeting poets. So there was that, and then there was like, the American Indian Graduate Association, and like meeting people from different nations, and that was like, that was really like nurturing for me, and you know, then many years later like, connecting to the Bay Area American Indian Two Spirit Society, so like, able to kind of like, you know, not have to choose to be like, Indian or mixed or like, queer, but to be able to be both. Um, yeah.

Lewis: What was the Bay Area American Indian Two Spirit Society like?

Brolawski: Well they're still going on, and they have put together the very first two spirit powwow, and it's the only one that exists in the US. So that is like, every February. I think there's now been seven or eight of them.

Lewis: Did that grow out of Gay American Indians in the Bay Area, or is that a different institution?

Brolawski: Yes, I think it did. Yeah.

Lewis: What were your experiences with them like? What did you do?

Brolawski: Um, well, um, the last time I was living out in California I had been involved with the drum, so just like singing, singing, and you know, people would ask us to go to different events and like, do — there was more and more interest in having like, an indigenous presence for things, so they would uh, like where we would sing at memorials or like at protests or you know, things like that. Yeah.

Lewis: Uh, were you uh, working also when you were living out there, or was it just like, you were doing grad student stuff, teaching and things like that?

Brolawski: Um, was I working? Um, I mean I suppose I was. When I was in graduate school, I had some like, just pretty terrible like, office jobs and stuff like that when I was a student at Mills. And then when I graduated, the dot coms were crashing, and so I kind of had this useless MFA in

poetry and you know, I was like a substitute teacher and a temp. So I had basically the worst jobs that you could —

Lewis: What was the worst job that you had?

Brolawski: Imagine. I mean, it was like the temp jobs. Like, you know? Like well, I would say actually what's worse than temping, because temping you would just go in and you're like, there for a day in the office and nobody cares about you and like, you know, so that's really not that bad, it's just — and I could write, you know? So it was like, not that bad. But actually the worst was substitute teaching and, you know, you do K, or I did like K through 12, and I was just in my early 20s at the time, so when I would teach high school I would get mistaken for a student and I was perceived as a female person so I also got no respect for being young and like, apparently female. But actually teaching the junior high students was the worst because they just — I think there's something like, neurologically about people that age, where like — and I think they've done studies on this, like they literally have not consolidated their sense of morals. Like, they don't care. They don't care. And I didn't care, like, you know, that kind of stuff when I was their age either. So they're very dangerous people [laughter], and it was really, um, humiliating often, and terrifying. Um, yeah. But it wasn't uninteresting, I'll say that.

Lewis: Was there like a time like in those years where you like, you know, imperfect terms obviously but was there a time where like you sort of like became aware of like being trans or like started identifying around trans or something else like un that way?

Brolawski: Yeah, um, I didn't even know what a trans person was like, for a long time. And I know that it's like, like even when I went to Santa Cruz I was like, 16 when I went there, and there surely were people who were trans, but it just like, wasn't a meme in through world. Like, and so it kind of didn't enter my consciousness right away. And I remember there being one person my freshperson year at Santa Cruz, there was like a person who was trans and I was kind of aware of them. And I think it was a FTM person. And I just kind of clocked their existence, but like, but I didn't really like, think about it as like a possibility. Like it just didn't seem like a possibility that you could be trans, or like, at least not to me. And it was while I was there that they added, there was like the GLB Center, the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Center, and it was some time during the mid, late 90s while I was a student there that they added the T. I think it might have been my, like, second year there. So maybe '96 or '97, but the GLB became a GLBT Center, and I'm sure now it's like GLBTLMO [laughter]. I mean, I'm sure it's got a lot more letters now, but like — so it was just beginning to kind of like, enter my consciousness I would say, in my late teens. And then, but it didn't really — and, you know, people just like assumed I was a lesbian because I was like, they thought I was female and I sort of dressed in this kind of male way, like, but like, but I didn't like, you know, I think those things sort of got conflated, you know what I'm saying? And so, like I said, I really didn't think of it as like, something that was an option that you could do until I was like, in my 20s. and then something began to like, come to my awareness that I didn't like being perceived as a female person. It felt wrong. And for a long time I was just like, well, there's not much I can do about that. And then it began, and then it gradually entered my awareness that there were things I could do. And you know, I remember just kind of like, feeling the increasing

trauma of being read or what I felt to be like, misread as a female person, and like, it would make me cry, you know? And I just suddenly was like, it came to my realization that I could do something about it, and that I didn't want, like, I particularly didn't want strangers to have that kind of power over me, to like, make me cry just by like, referring to me as she or something. So that's when I began to kind of take steps or like, or transition, and you know, I first changed my name and I remember someone asking me at the time like, um, are you transitioning? And I was like, and I was kind of shocked, or like, I didn't know how to answer. Like I felt like the question was like, presumptuous. But then the more I thought about it I was like, oh yeah, like, I guess I am. Like, I'm like, linguistically transitioning, or like, I'm like taking control of language, you know? Like, naming is power, and I'm like, taking that power for myself. And that was sort of okay for awhile, and then like, I don't know, someone I knew was like, oh, like, I see that you have a new identity now or something. And for some reason that really bothered me, like I was like, you know what, no. I'm the same person. I've just like, realigned language to fit with my identity. Like, I'm more who I am. I don't have a different identity now. So for me it really like, the language part was always like, more important, or I don't know, I don't know if that's right. It's like, language and the body are so tied together that it's hard to make that distinction.

Lewis: Do you feel like a sort of — like there's this like social construction of “transitioning,” and I'm putting it in scare quotes, like do you feel sort of like a sense of continuity around the way that you understood yourself sort of before and after?

Brolawski: Oh, that's an interesting question. Um, do I feel a sense of continuity of like, who I was before versus now?

Lewis: How you understood yourself.

Brolawski: I mean, I think transitioning allowed for me to calm down a little bit about like, the trauma that I would experience. You know, and part of it, and I know this is maybe not a good reason, but like, I implied that part of the reason I transitioned was because I didn't want strangers to have this power to like, upset me. And you're pointing to yourself like you understand that.

Lewis: [Laughter]. Yes.

Brolawski: But I feel like that's a really bad reason, you know what I mean? Like, I don't know. But it's the reality, you just kind of want to live your life and not, like, have the like, server at like the café be able to like reduce you to tears, you know? When you don't even know that person. Like, they don't care about you, like why should they be able to like, you know, pierce your very soul in this way? Over something so banal, like, as like, a pronoun or something. So I don't know, and then like, you can go into the whole thought experiment of like, well, if I like, was a hermit and I like kived in a cave, like, would I need to transition then? Like, you know, but again, I think that's like a kind of futile thought experiment, because like of course we are social and that's how we, part of the way that we perceive ourselves is through like, the mirror of others. Um, and so, I don't know, I think part of the difficulty for me was then and still now that I like don't see

examples of myself, like, I don't like, come across people who are like, my pronoun is it, or whatever, you know? Or like, I don't see people that like, whose gender seems similar to mine very often or ever. You know, and it's very, like the binary is very seductive. Like, it's the whole basis for every kind of spectrum of pornography, from like, you know, actual pornography to you know, whatever, it's a cliché but like, the cover of magazines or whatever, along with like, you know, whiteness, right? We see these things glorified. And of course like, in reality we don't, most of us don't haunt those extreme ends of the spectrum, but most of us are like — or most people are like, clearly identified towards one end or the other. I don't know, this is like a really roundabout way of answering your question and I think I'm like, avoiding it because I don't know how to answer, like, do I feel a sense of continuity? That would imply I felt, like, a stable sense of self, which I don't. And part of the reason I don't I'd because like, I don't recognize myself in the mirror. And part of the reason I don't recognize myself in the mirror is that I don't see myself mirrored in the world. So I guess yes, I feel a sense of continuity in that I have like, always felt and I can continue to feel like, discontinuous, and I'm like, using the temporal term to describe myself, but it like, feels correct. And yes, I feel like I'm the same person, you know? My comment earlier about like, having a different identity. Like, I don't think transitioning means I have a different identity. I think it means I've like, taken control of language, and I've taken control of like, my body, through like, you know, various — and I said I didn't want to talk about this, but through various like, sort of medical interventions. Like, I've like, made changes to my body. So, I think it's just about like, a continual, like, there's like a continual reevaluation of one's self and unfortunately like, it has to be in relation to others.

Lewis: Yeah.

Brolawski: It just has to be, because like, those are our models.

Lewis: Yeah.

Brolawski: And when you don't see models, you're on really a shifting ground. Like, you're on really unsteady ground, hence through importance of like, these stories that you're collecting.

Lewis: Yeah. I'll say at least for me like, one of the things that's so difficult about finding a discourse around describing these experiences is that the available terms like, always seem to locate like, the change, the evolution, the transition whatever in the person, when it's obviously something that's always in negotiation with the world, you know?

Brolawski: Yeah.

Lewis: And so like, asking questions like when did you transition is even just like, locates the problematic in the trans person, you know?

Brolawski: Right. Well, and one of the really interesting things is this idea of location, like where are you?

Lewis: Yeah, as though trans people are like, distinct and like, you know, being located and also in changing that location in relation to contact situations.

Brolawski: Yeah, and it's a literal problem too, like what bathroom do you use, like, what bod do you check? And when you don't feel like the correct place exists, you feel like you're not anywhere, and you feel like you're not a person.

Lewis: Yeah, yeah. When did you come to New York?

Brolawski: I came to New York for the first time at the end of 2006, and I lived here for eight years and then I was in California again for like, a year and a half in 2015/2016, and then I came back for a second time in August of last year. So August 2016.

Lewis: And you were, when you first moved out here, you were dissertating, finishing your PhD work, yeah.

Brolawski: I was dissertating, yeah. Mm-hmm.

Lewis: Why did you move to New York?

Brolawski: Um, I fell in love with someone here. That's the real reason. When I don't want to say that reason I say, oh, I'd always wanted to like, come to New York, but —

Lewis: Totally [laughter].

Brolawski: But I came for love.

Lewis: Um, and did you find like, what kind of scenes and relationships and communities did you develop in New York City?

Brolawski: I mean, New York has everything, so I found what I wanted. Like, which was like, um, you know, I found the East Coast Two Spirit Society, which was, um, they had these like, powwow dance classes, so I was like, doing dance, and that was really healing for me, because part of my like social anxiety, and part of really connects to my gender anxiety, like resulted in me never dancing. Like just feeling like I was too afraid to dance. So like, actually connecting to that, and I must have been like, I guess I was, didn't really start dancing until I was like, almost 30, you know? And I realized that I loved to dance. And that furthermore, like, Indian dancing and cowboy dancing are the same, you know, in a lot of ways. Like, you lead with your left foot and you count to four, basically. So, and then I found, um, pretty soon after I moved here, I found, um, country musicians. And not only country musicians, but queer country musicians, which doesn't seem like, it is not the first thing you think of when you think of New York, but you know, like I said, like New York has everything, and so there was even, and there is now, as you know, a little niche community of queer country people. So, um, that was very healing for me also. Um, because you know, we think of like the cliché of country music as that it's, you know, like the place I grew up,

like homophobic and racist and all that stuff, and so to find people who were like, not only not homophobic, but like, queer and like, you know, not all white, and you know, like cool people to boot, so to speak.

Lewis: How did you get into playing country music?

Brolawski: Um, through the, uh, UC Berkley Radio station, CALX, which I was listening to when I was there, and they played something, they played the Carter Family, and they played Ferlin Husky, who was like this Hank Williams imitator, and Hank Williams, and Kitty Wells. And those were like, the first names I was like — because I would like listen to the radio and keep notes on things I wanted to check out. And so I went to Amoeba Records in Berkley and there's like a dollar vinyl section that I like found Kitty Wells, um, who is the queen of country music, um, and the Carter Family, and — but they were doing it like, Hank Williams was like, doing this thing in his singing, and this was the thing that like really got to me, got into me, um, I didn't know what it was, like, but his voice was breaking or cracking, and I was like, what is that? Like, what, and I tried to ask people, I was like, what is that called, like, you know, when he's like, breaking his voice like that? And like, nobody really knew what I was talking about or could name it. I finally realized it was yodeling. But like, it's not like yodelay; it's like he's doing it on words, you know? Like, so it's like, so when I try to like, write about it, I described it as like, substantive yodeling as opposed to like not yodeling on like nonsense syllables. And I think what's so beautiful about that is that it seems to like, be a musical, or like, vocal expression of this extreme kind of emotion, which is to say like, what country music is known for: heartbreak. Heartache. Heartache and break.

Lewis: Yeah, the breaking of the [inaudible].

Brolawski: Yeah, it's like, made literal in the voice. And you add to that the kind of interesting feature, which I didn't think of until many years later, but when you're yodeling you're going from your chest voice to your head voice. So like, you know, a male to like a kind of female register, and I was really interested in that. And I wanted to be able to do it. Like, I was like, I want to do that. Um. But just like I couldn't find anyone to tell me what it was, like, I definitely couldn't find anyone to teach me how to do it, so I just tried to do it, and eventually I could. Um, and I was listening to these songs furthermore and I was like, these songs are really easy, structurally, you know? There's like three chords, it doesn't seem that hard melodically, you know, and I have not been trained as like a singer or anything, I don't know how to do that, but I've been writing poetry, and I thought I can — I want to sing these songs. And so I think I got a guitar when I was like 19 and I basically just figured out how to play G, C, and D, and that was it, like, that was all I needed, you know, for awhile. And then I learned A and E and C and F, you know what I mean? But you can really get by knowing a handful of the chords, and then you can play like any country song.

Lewis: Did you start writing your own songs then? Or not until later?

Brolawski: Yeah, and then I pretty quickly started writing my own songs since I was like, this is like really easy, and I'm already like, writing songs anyway, you know? Like, by writing poetry and I was even like, I was even writing rhymed verse at that time, so like it was pretty easy to then, you know, start writing songs. Um, and yeah, I mean, as you know that's what I've been doing ever since.

Lewis: When did you start playing with other people?

Brolawski: Um, it was right before I moved to New York, so it was probably like 2004 or '05. I like, I met this guy on Craigslist, Andy, Handy Andy, um, who played everything. Like, banjo, guitar, pedalsteel, you know, he sang, and so we would just get together and sing and play. And I never really thought about performing. I didn't think I was ready for that, but we did play like, a couple of shows just the two of us before I moved to New York. But then I had like gotten the bug and I really wanted to start performing, and so I went to Craigslist again and that's where I started finding these queer country people. And I think I specifically put in the ad — no, that's not true. I first met some like random cis straight guy and played with him for awhile but then I was like, I'm just going to see, like, you know, if there's like queer people who are queer who are country, interested in country, and like, and there were, and like I would say within like six months of moving here I had like, gotten the band together and you know, I started playing.

Lewis: And what was the name of the band?

Brolawski: The Low and the Lonesome. Yeah.

Lewis: Why did you guys choose that name?

Brolawski: [Laughter]. First we were — I think we wanted the word Lonesome in it, or I did, and there were these like, I think it still exists, there was a like a band name generator website.

Lewis: [Laughter].

Brolawski: [Laughter]. And it's like, you put in a word like cowhand, and it's like, Cowhand Dove Tether and the Orangutans, you know? Just like, it will just, and then you hit reload and it just generates all these names. But then I think it was Naomi Clark who you've also interviewed — or not you, but who has been interviewed for this project — who came up with the Low and the Lonesome, and she was the drummer.

Lewis: I didn't know that was Naomi's idea.

Brolawski: Mm-hmm.

Lewis: So you guys were guitar, drums, pedal steel, and fiddle?

Brolawski: Uh-huh, and eventually fiddle, yeah.

Lewis: Oh yeah.

Brolawski: And bass.

Lewis: And bass, right right. And how long did you play with the Low and the Lonesome?

Brolawski: Oh, a couple of years. Maybe a year and a half, something like that. And then we kind of split off into different projects. Um, yeah, but those are people that I still sort of see and play with.

Lewis: Mm-hmm, part of the same scene still?

Brolawski: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's not a big scene as you might imagine. I mean, as you know.

Lewis: Yeah. You played the [inaudible] and Juan & the Pines immediately after the Low and the Lonesome?

Brolawski: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I mean, that was like the next project. But kind of in-between I was playing with Our dearly departed Bryn Kelly —

Lewis: That's right, yeah.

Brolawski: And we had a little old-timey group called the Invert Family.

Lewis: Can you talk a little bit about the Invert Family Singers?

Brolawski: Sure. Um, so Bryn Kelly, who, um, who died, gosh, last year, introduced me to, uh, a bass player friend of hers and you know, we would — she and I would just get together because she loved gospel music and old time music, and we met through like another musician friend, and so we would just like get together and sing the old songs. And then — but she was really good at like, putting together like, mash-ups of gospel and old time songs, and so she would make these wonderful like, vocal arrangements and she could always come up with harmony parts, and she would like teach me the harmony parts and then I would sing them, and I would sing harmony for her, because I was — there was no way I was going to sing lead because she had this like, giant voice, and I really just wanted to hear her sing. But I was kind of a terrible harmony singer. Or, not terrible at it, but I was not good at coming up with the harmony parts, but she was. So we had like a little outfit where she sang and we had sometimes mandolin and Naomi played washboard sometimes and we had my friend Nelle playing fiddle. Um, yeah, and we didn't do that many shows, but um, but I loved playing with Bryn, she was such a magnificent performer, and she brought glory, or glow-ry as my friend Andy said it ought to be pronounced when singing. Glow-ry.

Lewis: I like — since we both sang with Bryn, I especially liked singing with another trans person. Uh, especially when Bryn can tell you all the harmonies to sing. [Laughter].

Brolawski: Yeah, it, I didn't realize how much it freed up my — I didn't even realize that much that I'd had anxiety about singing with non trans people until I started singing with trans people and then I was like oh, this is so relaxing.

Lewis: I feel like I want to ask you more, you said some interesting things about yodeling and, like, both like the affective and the sort of bodily, just technical parts of country music, and I kind of want to ask you more about like, what do you think is queer about country music?

Brolawski: Yeah, um. Well, I think there's something queer about the fetishization of, like, loneliness and sadness. And, you know, like one of the tropes or like clichés of country music is that you are always searching for home, and you're, like, glorifying it in a certain way but there's also this feeling that you can't get home. And I think a lot of trans people, including myself, like, feel that quite literally. Um, you know, and then there's this idea of like, transcendence, like you're not going to be home until you go to that other shore, you know? I'm using air quotes, too, the other shore meaning like, when you meet your maker. And then of course there's like, the proclivity for like, getting drunk in a lot of these songs, which a lot of us have used as a way of escaping our sadness. Yeah, and then I think, you know, what's most common and like, deep in this kind of music is sadness and loneliness. But one of the things that I think is so appealing about it, and one of the things that makes country music for me medicine is that it's like, I don't know, I think of it as like, homeopathic medicine or like a vaccine in a way of like, you take a small amount of the thing and it inoculates you against the thing. So if you like, are sad or lonely and you like, take this sad music inside of you, or you like, metabolize it by making it part of your body, then it heals you from that thing. I guess you always have the danger of, like, taking too much, and then you really are sad.

Lewis: You get sick, yeah. [Laughter].

Brolawski: Yeah, it gives you the thing that you're trying to inoculate yourself against, and I've certainly had that, you know, where like, take some too much and I've gotten myself into too sad of a state, but normally I feel like what that kind of music has done for me is like, really through like the vocalization of the thing, um, which is to say like, pain and suffering and loneliness and longing for home, and it's like, paradoxically heals those longings.

Lewis: Do you want to talk a little bit more about your poetry and how that's developed over the years?

Brolawski: Sure. Um, I mean it's something that I've always — I can't ever remember like not being moved by language. I feel like it's like how I've like organized my reality. Um, and you know, I was always really interested in like, sounds that repeated or sounds that like, sounded like other things that were interesting. Which is to say rhyme, although I didn't have a word for that then. And, you know, and I would say that like, that was a great gift that my mother gave to me, like,

my father gave me the gift of like, the water, and my mother gave me the gift of language. She was always reading and, you know, like, I mentioned we were quite poor growing up, but they like, got an encyclopedia set for me, like, paid for it on monthly installments, you know? And so whenever there was like a question about anything, you know, like how high is Mt. Kilimanjaro, like, we'd look it up in the encyclopedia, you know, and she had — and she was always like, looking up words that we didn't know in the dictionary and, so there was always this sense of like, an interest in like, investigating the meaning of words, and also like, even like their roots and you know, so there was like this attention to the like, materiality of language, and also like it's meaning. And then literature, too. Like, she always had, she loves 19th century novels, and also 20th century novels, and her tastes kind of end in the 1950s or 60s, but like, you know, there was like, books around. And you know, when you read books, you sort of get interested in the words that form them, and somehow, like, I came across a reference to Baudelaire when I was like, in junior high. And I asked for like, *Fleur de Mal*, the *Flowers of Evil*, for Christmas, and got it from my grandmother, and that was sort of like the thing that like, turned me on or tuned me in to poetry, even though it was like a translation, whatever. And I was already writing, but I just kept writing. But it was like, very secretive. Like, I would like write, and I would like, put it in a — like, I bought with my allowance like one of those like file cabinets that locks, you know? So it was very, very secret and like, hermitic for me. And so it took me years and years to kind of like, come out or like, eventually, you know, share my work with other people. And then like I said, when I moved to Berkley I realized that people were actually — that a poet was actually a thing that a person was in the world. You know, like I didn't realize you could be that, just like I didn't realize that you could be a trans person or even what that was. And now it's like, I mean, it's what I do now. Like, you know, poetry, I guess, is not like, a job in the sense that like, most people don't make their money doing it, even like, the most successful poets like, make their money from teaching or lecturing or whatever. But you know, for a long time I was like, too embarrassed to say that I was a poet, but now I say that I'm a poet, and like, I don't even like tell people that I'm a teacher unless they like, ask how I make money. Because like, I consider it my job and my vocation, um, along with music, and of course music and poetry are completely the same, even though culturally they're like, a little bit different. For me they're like, totally intertwined. Um, I'm not sure if that —

Lewis: Otherwise how has poetry sort of like, especially shaped kind of your sense of who you are, whether that's around gender or race or —

Brolawski: Yeah, um, I mean, yeah. It absolutely has and does and you know, one of the — I mentioned like the pronoun stuff at the beginning and like discovering these difficult kinds of pronouns in middle English, and you know, one of the things that I discovered when I started studying medieval poetry in graduate school is that, like, things could be spelled any way. Like, before the printing press was invented, people just spelled things like however. And that kind of like blew my mind and — in a good way, like, opened my mind. And so I started realizing that I could like, spell things different ways. And I think that there was something about this experimentation with spelling in particular or like, you know, if you wanted to be academic you might say like, these received ideas of how like standardization of whatever, like, I like realized I could — that it was like, it could be a place, like a site for play. And that I could like, somehow

constitute my body through that. like, which is to say like, my poetic body, my linguistic body. But that was like, for me kind of like the same thing as my physical body. But it was really hard to kind of write overtly about these things, um, which is to say like, the way that language constituted my sense of my gender identity or my racial identity because there's so much pressure to like, be those things and to like, weaponize your identity in all these ways. And so I didn't really — so I kind of like, obfuscated those things and didn't write directly about them, um, until pretty recently, and so my new book that I just gave you is called *Of Mongrelitude*, and it's kind of about that question. It's like, about being a mongrel like, you know, a mixed race, like mixed gender person, like, but also mongrel in the sense of like, you know, mongrels like used in the disparaging way, um, to describe like a dog that's not like a pure bred or whatever. Um, but it's also used to described language. So like, to describe like a creole or a hybridized tongue. So I was thinking on the model of like, negrotude, mongrelitude, and it was really the first time that I tried in somewhat more overt ways to talk about like, how my body has been formed through language, and the ways that I might like, not just be like a passive victim of the way that like, language has been put on me in these various ways, but that I like, might wield it, like, in a way that can like, give me some kind of power. And of course I've been like practicing this, I've been practicing like the wielding of language for a really long time, but this was the first time I had tried more like, deliberately to speak to my body and to speak my body. I know that sounds really cheesy, but it's true, unfortunately.

Lewis: Can you talk a little bit more about what you think about the pronoun it?

Brolawski: What I think about it?

Lewis: Why you like it.

Brolawski: Yeah. I mean, you can't hear this, but you're smiling when you say it, so there's — I get the sense that it might please you, too. And I don't know, it pleases me. Like, I can't — I don't know if I'm going to be able to describe it very well, but I've been trying for so many years to like, find a pronoun that felt right and, you know, when people use he for me, I don't correct them. It's fine. When people use she for me, it upsets me, but whatever. Um, and I don't have a problem with they. I think they is great, like I love how much more it's come into use. Um, and I love that it's like, multiple and you know, and there's a very old pedantic argument that says like oh, you can't use they for like, a singular gender neutral pronoun because like, they is plural and blah, blah, blah. But like, you know, there's examples of singular they going back to the medieval period and certainly it exists in Shakespeare and Agatha Christie and now they use it on NPR. So it's like you know, so that argument doesn't really hold anything anymore. Um. But there's something like, so elegant about it to me. And I really think of it as a great leveler, and, you know, for me like, in like — and there's kind of like a spiritual argument for this for me, which is that, like, you know, I believe that I'm connected to, like, plants and animals, and like, and to me it's like an honor to have the same pronoun as a plant or as an animal. Or as an object even. Like, everything is like, sacred, and to me like it implicitly makes that argument. Um, or maybe I don't know. Maybe it doesn't make that argument, but to me that's what it means and why it feels so good, because it is this kind of acknowledgement that everything has the divine in it.

Lewis: Have you had — or have there been relationships with other than human entities that have been especially important for you?

Brolawski: Yeah. Yes. I had a dog for 16 years. I had a dog companion. A pitbull named Snoopy, Snoop, Snoo. And yeah, and towards the end of her life, like I would sort of like, kind of jokingly refer to her as it, but then it sort of became real, like, and I just started referring to it as it. Like at first it was just sort of funny, but then it was like oh yeah, because like, her “gender” always seemed really inscrutable to me, like, and like who knows if this was just like me like projecting whatever all onto her, but like, but I really felt like her gender was like, not either. Like, or maybe like that’s just maybe any animal. I don’t know, like, who knows. But she sort of became an it. And what first became a joke later seemed to be like more correct and appropriate for that creature. Um. And she was like, my constant companion for 16 years, and taught me a lot about, like, how to — she taught me a lot about love, and this idea of like, being with a creature and, you know, like being like, friends with a creature, and not thinking of myself like, as like, her companion and not as like someone who owned her or like whatever, like. Clearly I was like, the alpha, but I don’t like this language around like, owning animals, you know?

Lewis: I like that idea about the inscrutability of it. It sort of — it reminds me of like, you know, Freud in English, like it’s id, but that just means it, right? Like that’s a part of the self that is inaccessible [inaudible]

Brolawski: Yeah, yeah. And inscrutability, I mean, I’m glad you just said that because that was always like my goal with my gender, I guess. Like, I want — like there’s some perverse part of me that like, wants people not to know.

Lewis: Yeah, like a pronoun of obfuscation.

Brolawski: Mm-hmm.

Lewis: A cult pronoun.

Brolawski: Yeah, yeah. Like, and I’ve had people say this about me like, in a bad way. Like, what is that? Or like refer to me as it because they don’t know what I am. And when I’m not in danger from that estimation, that’s something that really pleases me. But to be realistic like, those times when people have referred to me like, as it, it means that they are confused, and that leads to violence. That can lead to violence.

Lewis: Yeah, and there’s also a long history of taking back the terms of our, you know, dehumanization.

Brolawski: Exactly.

Lewis: Mm-hmm. Um, are there any ways that like, you feel like New York City, being queer or trans or whatever in New York City has changed over the years since you first arrived here?

Brolawski: No.

Lewis: [Laughter].

Brolawski: Um, I was kind of surprised when I moved to New York after being in the San Francisco area. I think I thought it would be the same, like, which is to say like, just as open as it is there. But I think it's not. Um, I think it's more open culturally in a lot of ways, and it's a lot more diverse in a lot of ways, but I think that maybe because it's bigger or because there's like, more of a diversity of types of communities that it's somewhat more queerphobic than — the Bay Area, let's face it, is like a bubble of that kind of thing, of safety. Um, and so I've experienced a lot more, um, harassment here than I have in the Bay Area, and my sense is that, I don't know, I don't think it's really changed that much since 2007. I don't know. What do you think?

Lewis: I don't know. I don't know. The lesbian bars are gone.

Brolawski: Yeah. That's true. That's one of the casualties of gentrification.

Lewis: I think that gentrification has gotten a lot — because I moved here in 2002, so not so much longer before you.

Brolawski: Uh-huh.

Lewis: I think gentrification has gotten a lot worse.

Brolawski: Yeah, the lesbian bars have closed down in San Francisco, too.

Lewis: Yeah, that's true, the [inaudible], yeah

Brolawski: Or the lesbian bar, I should say.

Lewis: Yeah. I don't know. Is there anything that you would want, like, about queer, trans, like NYC that you'd want folks to especially know or remember in the future? [Inaudible] the time very quickly.

Brolawski: Um, you know what I really miss is there was a place called the Big Apple Ranch.

Lewis: Is that gone?

Brolawski: Did you ever go? It's gone now.

Lewis: Oh, God.

Brolawski: So the Big Apple Ranch was like this gay or whatever, queer I guess, but really gay, um, two stepping venue, and kind of this no-mans land in-between Union Square and Chelsea and you could go on Saturday nights, and there would be like a two-stepping lesson and then they would play music and you could two-step with any old type of person that you wanted.

Lewis: What kind of folks would go there? Like, gay men?

Brolawski: Mainly gay men, but there were also like, trans people and lesbians and yeah, it was kind of a beautiful thing, but it doesn't exist anymore.

Lewis: Were they like, older? Or, like, 20s, 30s, 40s? All kinds?

Brolawski: 30s through 60s. It was like, some older people. Yeah, it was pretty great.

Lewis: Um, look at my little list. You can look at them too. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you feel like there's a hole or something you want to —

Brolawski: Um, not off the top of my head. Um, I don't think so. I think you've covered all of the relevant parts of me. [Laughter]. Which is to say, poetry and music.

Lewis: Alright, great. Well, I guess — why don't we wrap up?

Brolawski: Okay.

Lewis: Thank you so much for your time, thanks.

Brolawski: It's really an honor. It's an honor to be part of this project, thank you AJ.

Lewis: Really delightful, thank you. No, we're delighted to have you, thank you.