NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

CAROLYN CONNOLLY

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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**Michelle O'Brien:** Hello. My name's Michelle O'Brien, and I will be having a conversation with Carolyn Connolly for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is December 25th, 2018—Christmas Day—and this is being recorded at Michelle's apartment in Flatbush. Hello.

**Carolyn Connolly:** Good morning.

**O'Brien:** How are you doing today?

**Connolly:** I'm doing really well.

**O'Brien:** Yeah. What brings you, um, back down to New York City?

**Connolly:** Um, I'm here kind of, you know, visiting friends and reconnecting with where I grew up a little bit, but mostly just to connect with friends—the extended family.

**O'Brien:** And where do you live these days?

**Connolly:** I live in the Hudson Valley, in the town of New Paltz. Um, yeah. Upstate New York.

**O'Brien:** Lovely. Um, is it upstate? Do they call it upstate?

**Connolly:** Um, yes. Yeah.

**O'Brien:** Excellent. I'm always unclear—

**Connolly:** I know [laughter]! Sometimes I, yeah [laughter]—

**O'Brien:** —if the Hudson Valley's upstate [laughter], okay. Yeah. Um, and so you grew up in New York?

**Connolly:** I did, um, I was born in Hialeah, Florida July 15th, 1968. I was adopted, and so I moved to Brooklyn when I was three days old, so the adoption was clearly arranged prior to my birth. Um, and I grew up...my parents took me to my house, which was on, 4001 Avenue K off of Flatbush Avenue, in the area that's commonly called Flatlands. And that's where I grew up in South Brooklyn, or Southern Brooklyn [laughter].

**O'Brien:** And give us a brief arc of your life. How long did you live in New York City?

**Connolly:** Uh, I moved out of New York approximately when I was 38, 39 years old, so I lived, you know, in Brooklyn most of my life and then a little bit in the Lower East Side, a little bit in Harlem in the late 90s, and then back to Brooklyn before I moved to Upstate New York.

**O'Brien:** Um, so you spent a good chunk of your adult life around the city?
Connolly: Yes, yeah.

O'Brien: Yeah, well [inaudible]—

Connolly: I was a consummate Brooklynite, yes.

O'Brien: Look forward to hearing all about that.

Connolly: [Laughter.]

O'Brien: Um, so, what do you remember of Flatlands when you were growing up?

Connolly: Um, you know, I think that, like, what I remember is playing games in the streets. You know, Manhunt in people's backyards, and Skully, which was a game played on the concrete. Uh, there wasn't much organized sports. Parks were pretty spartan. And it was a white ethnic area, so I would describe it as being an amalgam of Italian, Irish, and Jewish. I'm not sure what the percentages were. At different times culturally, it would feel that it was kind of a contestation between Italians and Irish for like the, you know, cultural landscape, your geography. You know, like, Catholic churches, Irish bars, Italian pastry shops, Italian pasta shops and specialty delis, and stuff like that.

O'Brien: How did your parents fit into that demographic schema?

Connolly: Uh, my grandparents immigrated from Ireland in the turn-of-the-century and moved to Broad Channel, which is an island off of Howard Beach and JFK Airport. And we defined ourselves as—my family was extremely Irish. Um, my parents got divorced soon after I was born, and although I, my, you know I have, I call myself Irish and Italian, I grew up in a house where we listened to the Irish radio, we had the Irish newspaper delivered, and we talked about Ireland as if it was part of where we were living growing up. Yeah.

O'Brien: What, how did you get along with your family as you were growing up?

Connolly: Um, well I grew up in the, my mom's side of the family, with my mom who was the youngest of, uh, there were four siblings, although my oldest uncle died in the early 1950s. So, just to be clear, it was my uncle and my aunt—who were my mom's sister and brother—and then my grandmother on my maternal side. Um, my dad was—who I saw periodically—was an alcoholic and a very intense man, and my mom was an alcoholic, um, and my aunt was an alcoholic, although less so, if that makes sense. Uh, and um, yeah. So it was sometimes hard, for sure.

O'Brien: So some rough [inaudible].

Connolly: Yeah.
O'Brien: And, uh, the schools that you went to growing up?

Connolly: Um, I went to P.S. 119—which was a public school—for the first, I guess you would describe that as four years or five years, kindergarten through fourth grade. And while I was doing that, I went to one day of religious instruction at St. Thomas Aquinas, also on Flatlands. It's a big Catholic church—just physically, irregardless of the parish size, very physically large structures. And then in 1978, my family moved further south into Brooklyn—and when I say south, I mean towards the beach, like Riis Park. Still technically the area called Flatlands—and my parents made the decision to send me to Catholic school. So I went to Saint Mary Queen of Heaven on Avenue M and 56th Street, and then after I graduated that, I was zoned for Tilden High School, which is a public high school—which I believe is now closed down—and that was considered a very, uh, in the hierarchy of public schools, that was considered one of the quote-unquote “worst, dangerous” public high schools. And my parents made the decision to send me to Nazareth High School, which was a small, more liberal high school. Ironically, not far from Tilden [laughter]. Yeah.

O'Brien: How was going to Catholic school for you?

Connolly: I think Catholic school was, you could probably say was a nodal moment of gender crisis. Um, and it kind of hearkens back to something I said earlier. When I was a kid, there were no gendered sports. My neighbors were...there were, I actually had two neighbors named Laurie, there were a couple of boys. We played games that were co-ed, so to speak, and it was very much like makeshift games, you know? And, when I went to Catholic school, two things occurred. One was there was the introduction of uniforms, gendered uniforms for boys and for girls, and that was suddenly very traumatic. And then two was the introduction of formalized Catholic sports, which largely at the time meant male sports, particularly in grammar school. Uh, so like, you know, there was like girls' volleyball, which was not even a formal activity, and there was like a boys' I guess you could say baseball team, and that type of things. Yeah.

O'Brien: So that, that gendering in uniforms and sports was really a lot of, very stressful for you.

Connolly: Yeah, and around that time I think also, that was when my par—my mom, the household I was living in...you know, we moved in 1978. Well...yeah, so we began the process of looking for a house in the fall of 1977, so that was after a very notable summer in New York. It was the summer of Sam—the serial killer David Berkowitz was operating in the outer boroughs of New York, including Brooklyn—and it was also the summer of the riots, uh, excuse me, the summer of the famous blackout of ‘77, and that led to a lot of rioting in New York, and in Brooklyn in particular. And so my parents made a decision, which I think was, in part, very much motivated by those two factors. We also lived in a really big house that was, like, structurally weird. It was like a three-apartment unit, and now at this point my parents got divorced, and so there was no purpose of having these, this whatever it was, like a six-bedroom house with two full kitchens—actually, two and a half kitchens, and like, you know, multiple master bathrooms. My mom wasn't looking to get remarried, and so we basically down-sized and also moved into what ostensibly was a nicer area. But that unfort—for whatever reasons, didn't lead
to as much happiness as, I think...from the outside, you'd kind of check off all these positive things are happening, but my mom's alcoholism became really acute during that period, and so there was a lot of intense, uh, bad things happening in my household around then.

O'Brien: Is there anything more you want to say about those difficulties? [Pause] It's up to you.

Connolly: Um, yeah, I mean...there's a lot of shame and a lot of—to this day, I think—a lot of uncertainty about what was going on, you know? I think, you know, when you try to disentangle your gendered past and try to disentangle what all these things mean, and what things were becoming acute, it's really hard to say on some level which one was the primary factor in some kind of, like, scientific sense, you know? Um, you know, the things—you know, I've written about some of this stuff and publicly talked about it. You know, my mom's alcoholism was really bad. Um, I stopped washing and, um, there were months of me not bathing at all and I had, like, crusted dirt and crusted shit all over my body and, um. It's kind of odd, I think, to, to...from the outside, if you looked at a portrait of my family, you would not think that these things were happening and were really as bad as they were. But they were, you know? And so I was definitely having, like, a meltdown internally and that was having external manifestations of not washing and not cleaning myself and, you know, my mom being really destructive. And just also being put into this new environment where there was a lot of, like, you know, the uniform and the culture in the new school that I was in felt very dramatic. But I also think it's an age thing, too. Like, you become more aware of what's happening in your surroundings when you're at that age, you know? 10 years old, you become much more conscious of your landscape at that point, you know? Yeah.

O'Brien: Gonna get some tissues.

Connolly: Sure. [Sounds of getting tissues. Inaudible.]

O'Brien: Thank you. [Blows nose.]

Connolly: You mentioned your adoption. Does, is that something that you thought about growing up? You seem to have put some thought into what you could figure out about it.

O'Brien: Yeah, I mean, like, I was born “Nameless Infant Thomas.” That's what my birth certificate actually says, Thomas being the last name of my mom. Um, my father's name on my birth certificate is blank. Um...of all the things, [laughter] so I just said all these traumatic things, um, I think you can...I guess what I'm trying to say, of all the things in my life, I'm not sure the adoption is that bad. I think that, like, I think one thing that adoption does is it creates—or at least what my adoption was—it does create an intellectual awareness of the construct of family, and also the—yeah, from a really early age. Like, my mom would use words like, “I chose you,” like, “I wanted you. I picked you out.” And those are actually pretty good words, actually. I think my mom had a profound inadequacy that she couldn't have—growing up conservative Irish Catholic—that she couldn't give birth to children, and my dad, after my parents got divorced, he went off and had two kids. So I, however you want to look at that, my mom was burdened with the feeling that she could not give birth. But, um, and I think when I
was little—like probably like five or six—and I told some people that I was adopted, that was probably...kids were a little mean, but in the hierarchy of things, especially being trans—and for me, knowing I was trans from a really early age, or gender dysphoric from a really early age—that was not the biggest deal. Being adopted was not the biggest thing. Yeah.

O'Brien: And what kind of work did your parents do when you were growing up?

Connolly: Yeah, so, my—

O'Brien: Or your family members.

Connolly: So my mom identified as a secretary and homemaker. On her death certificate, that’s what it says: “HOMEMAKER.” She was a secretary. Um...I apologize, I don’t have all the years with me right now, but let’s say my mom was born in the mid-30s. That would put her at, that would put my mom at 20 around the mid-50s. I would say my mom worked for a very short period of time after high school, as a secretary in some office or another. She was very proud of the fact that she could type really well. And, um, but that was it. And my dad, after high school he joined the Navy during the Korean War, and he learned—he was put on a destroyer and he learned early computer mechanics, and he had an aptitude for it. And so my dad for most of my, for most of what I remember, my dad worked for the brokerage firm Paine Webber, which was a Wall Street firm. And he worked in a sector of the company called information control. And he was in a position of some significance of authority, and it involved, like, the actual physical maintenance of computer systems, like large computers. I mean, that were the size of a room and such like that, yeah.

O'Brien: Who paid the bills at your mom's house?

Connolly: Uh, my dad gave alimony, which was very small. I believe it was like $40 a month, or something like that? And my uncle, my aunt, and my grandma had a pension. They all chipped in. And my grandma who died in, I think around, like, 89 maybe—my grandma was at that point in her life around 89 years old, she was a hair under 90. Basically an agreement was made...So basically agreement was made, my grandmother, obviously, was in her 60s by the time I was like—here I’m throwing around some dates—basically my mom was going to raise me, take care of my grandmother, while her older sister and brother went out and paid the bills by working office jobs. Yeah.

O'Brien: And you mentioned dealing, knowing you were gender dysphoric from a very young age.

Connolly: Yeah. Yeah.

O'Brien: And what's that, what was that knowing like?

Connolly: Well, you know, like, there's always a weight, like...I just turned 50 years old, but even more important than that, I'm nearing my thirtieth year of being out and trans, however you
want to pick those dates. And so my narrative, you know, might sound less introspective or more traditional than other people's, or boring, cliché maybe, and so I'm willing to concede that in advance, a priori. Um, you know, I remember being four and five years old and going to bed every night, and wishing I was going to wake up in a different body. I wanted to be a girl. I remember telling my parents that, my aunt in particular, and my mom: I wanted to be a girl. And I think there was an indulgence of some of that behavior, you know, which might have had a theatrical tinge of it when I was five years old. Dressing up in my mom's clothes, dressing up in my aunt's clothes, begging them to let me grow out my hair and, you know, from a very early age. And I think important for me was I had an older neighbor who wanted to engage in homosexual behavior with me, or gay behavior, and so that was a really positive thing in some ways, because it actually created some of my first initial awarenesses of sexual identities and how my own gendered identity differed from my own sexual identity. So I was like, so I never really...I've gone through life different times identifying as bisexual, queer, or a lesbian, but I never was primarily attracted to men. You know, like, and so I had some kind of, the ability to kind of disentangle some of these things, you know? I remember, probably around '77 or '78, my parents bought a set of—for me, essentially, or the house—a set of Encyclopedia Brittanicas. And within having those for a month or so, I had read every section on homosexuality, every section on transvestitism, and transexuality hundreds upon hundreds of times.

Connolly: Wow.

O'Brien: I pored over those definitions and, um, I knew them by heart. And so these were all internal things, like I think a lot of people have this process long before you externally are saying—although you could argue that I was—but, like, long before I came out in a capital-Coming Out way, I had already started to like this process of delineation of who am I attracted to and what do I, am I transvestite, what does that mean? Am I a transsexual, what does that mean? And stuff like that, yeah.

Connolly: So you mentioned this year, 1977, and what was happening in New York: Summer of Sam, blackout. Do you remember what effect that had on you, that sort of context of what was happening in New York City at that time?

O'Brien: Well, I mean, I think yes and no. And I think that, like, again, so David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam killer, did kill people in Brooklyn, in South Brooklyn, near Coney Island. You know, your listeners will have to look up the details. I'm not sure I'm going to remember them all well. But so, there was a couple shot, and that was in Brooklyn near our house. And the young woman who was murdered was, I believe she was Jewish, and they had her memorial at I.J. Morris Funeral Home, which was on Flatbush Avenue, next to the Animal Hospital where I took my pets. And so I can remember, you know, both the news—the funeral was like an event with news cameras and stuff like that—and so I remember that, and I also remember David Berkowitz getting caught, and, and all of those elements. So I think that that period, you could, like anyone from a child's view, there was a kind of chaos and fear. You know, the blackout happened in the summer. I think Son o— I think David Berkowitz was arrested like a week or two after the blackout, and I remember sitting on my stoop listening to a transistor radio, our
only connection to the world, listening about the looting happening across New York City. And just as a child—I probably was like nine at this point—just being like, “Whoa!” You know, “This is really intense,” you know? Yeah.

O’Brien: When did you first encounter queer people or gender-deviant people or...?

Connolly: I think that there's a couple of moments. I think that there was a neighbor on Flatbush Ave—excuse me, on Avenue K, that, his name was Freddie, and I believe he was gay. My mom's hairdresser. So I would say some time around 1980—and I would've been 12 at this point, 13—he was 100% gay, I mean my mom openly talked about it, and my mom really liked him. And um, yeah. And there was a boy in the neighborhood who I believe was, he was very effeminate, and I believe most people understood him to be gay. And I can remember being, running into him on the street—because I don't know where he went school, actually, so it wasn't a person I knew particularly well—but I remember running into him on the street and talking to him and being like, you know, just having those moments of being like, feeling like A) I think I knew he was gay, but also feeling like he had this different energy. And he may have not identified as gay at that time, I mean, this is really early on, we're both—even if he was within two years of me, he couldn't have only been like 16, you know? So those were my first introductions. Oh, and then in high school, a girl who was on the, was a cheerleader, went away to...she was a drunk, and she got sent to rehab, and when she came back from rehab, she was a lesbian. Um, and uh, so those were some of the first initial introductions, yeah.

O’Brien: What did you do after high school?

Connolly: A lot of drinking and drugging. You know, I think that, um...I got really...in some ways, I came into my own, and I mean this in a positive and you can interpret it whatever, but I became, one of my initial identities was I became like a metalhead. I was in a really, I was in a unique period of time musically where bands like Metallica, Anthrax, Slayer were coming out and they were playing in clubs in Brooklyn, like L'Amour's in Bensonhurst. And I was just becoming of age to become interest in that, and I dove, you know, deep into the water of listening, obsessing about music, wanting to be in bands, wanting to just immerse myself in that culture. And that became—a part of that culture became me smoking a lot of pot, drinking a lot of alcohol, and I was aggressive in desiring to do every possible drug available to me at the time. So, like, codeine pills and angel dust and all of that stuff. So after high school, I kind of did nothing really, on some level. I think one thing—I came to this realization earlier, or recently. So, two interesting things that happened. One is I remember I got a job as a, working at a pharmacy and I had long hair at this point, and I think people may not truly understand how disruptive this was. From the time I was 15 years old, I had hair down to my chest and I would constantly get hit on by men, constantly. And when I wasn't being hit on by men, I was being violently threatened. Uh, and I was, I stood out—I was very tall as a kid, and I stood out, and either people accepted me as a girl, in which case people would give me one kind of attention, or I began to receive tremendous negative attention. And what this meant, from a work perspective, was I was completely unemployable. And I remember, I had a job working at a pharmacy behind a counter, and that job didn't work out, and then I can remember two instances. One is, I was offered a job working at a lumber yard on Utica Avenue, and contingent
on me getting that job would be me cutting my hair to collar-length, which I wouldn't do. And then another job I was offered was to work at the El Caribe—which is funny if you look at the, Donald Trump has a bunch of connections to the El Caribe. The El Caribe is like a big Italian, like, wedding establishment in South Brooklyn near Kings Plaza, and I was offered a job there to be a server. And that was a really good job. People were making, in 1986, people were making, you know, $100 a night, $150 a night as a server, which is a lot of money back then. Still a lot of money for today. And they wanted me to work there. I had friends that were connected to there. And they would not hire me unless I cut my hair, and I could not do that. Like, my gender dysphoria, if you want to call it that was—I'm not sure I thought of it that way back then, but I, this was important to me. I could not mentally do that. So after high school, I got jobs, but it was really hard to get jobs at the time. My friend's older brother was a crack addict, and he worked for Pepsi-Cola and he had this—he was basically a Pepsi-Cola delivery driver, which was, again, a really good blue collar job. He made so much money on a daily basis that he would pay me out of his salary—so I would get paid like $80 a day to work for him—delivering Pepsi-Cola. That's how much money he made on a daily basis, but he was a crack addict, so eventually he lost that job, and it was really hard for me to find employment. Yeah.

O'Brien: So, you got into the metal scene in the mid-80s?

Connolly: Mm hm.

O'Brien: And, so long hair was a feature of the metal scene, yeah?

Connolly: Yes. Yeah, yeah.

O'Brien: What were the gender politics of the metal scene like? How did you fit into that? Like, you talked about one element of this—

Connolly: Well, I think the thing that like, people, a lot—

O'Brien: —that was really important to you, the long hair.

Connolly: This doesn't happen as much any more, but I think one of the things people will say is they'll say to me, when they hear that, they go, “Oh, Poison” and like, you know, these glam bands that wore makeup. That was not my interest aesthetically, nor were... I think that there's a lot of misnomers. I think, like, when I think about homophobia and bigotry in the metal scene, the two things that stick out for me is Guns & Roses—who were really overtly homophobic in the late 80s—and Skid Row, which is a band from New Jersey, which people may not have heard of, but they were a huge band. They were, like, ascendant. They would have been like a Bon Jovi if they didn't fall apart. And the lead singer of Skid Row used to wear this t-shirt that said, “AIDS kills fags dead.” And so, what I would say is that the glam metal scene and folks that were wearing makeup were oftentimes the most overtly homophobic and aggro about it. It was almost like they were policing their own subculture. And I was attracted to the more aggressive, angrier music. If I were to talk about the gender politics, I would describe it as, like, a little bit sexless? It's definitely, I mean overall, it's a very male scene. But it was very sexless, but had
interesting politics, too. Like, there would be bands talking about U.S. interventions in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and war as a concept, and—excuse me—and so, I was attracted to those things. Perhaps more abstract, you know, like Dungeons & Dragons and that type of stuff, but also then like the more gritty kind of urban kind of attitude, too.

O'Brien: Yeah. For other metalheads who grew their hair long, assigned male folks—

Connolly: Yeah.

O'Brien: I mean, you had this gender dysphoria that really motivated you to want to keep that hair—

Connolly: Yeah. Yeah.

O'Brien: —even if that meant costs for employment. What were the circumstances of other people that weren't trans women who would want to grow their hair long?

Connolly: Well, to be honest with you, I definitely stood out amongst my friends in terms of, I was the most metal-looking person. And that's like, if you ever watch videos, like look at the video of Slayer playing Studio 54 in 1985. You can watch that on YouTube. All the people in the audience have short hair. You know, like, if you, there's a stereotype maybe even about the hippies, like every male during the 1960s had long hair. The realities were is that most people didn't. It was perhaps the most dysphoric or the most committed people that—you know, because you couldn't hide your hair. In a way that you can change your clothes or hide tattoos, you couldn't...being male and wearing a ponytail in 1986? That alone could get you killed. What I'm trying to say is that wasn't an image of someone being like, “oh, I have long hair, but I'm keeping it more male-identified.” A ponytail was considered like super-feminine, so just having long hair made you very different, you know? So I would say, as I got older, and now like I'm, it's after high school and people are starting to adult, I stood out even more and became more of an anachronism in my world, you know? Um, yeah.

O'Brien: So how long were you spending most of your time doing drugs?

Connolly: I mean, it comes in different layers and so went through different periods. I think from '82 to '86, I was really into taking drugs and drinking, and then after high school I just focused on drinking. As I mentioned, my friend, a friend of mine was a crack addict, and that had a pretty big impact on me and a lot of people in my community. Angel dust was the big drug in Brooklyn in the 80s, and the thing about angel dust is, like, you don't see a lot of recreational angel dust users. It's a really, really destructive, frightening drug that impacts you neurologically, makes people very violent and impervious to pain. And so, at some point I had the maturity [laughter], if you will, of deciding not to do that. And cocaine, which was very cool, was very expensive. Which is why crack was so appealing to lots of folks in our communities, because it was so cheap. But I, at that point, I think I had made some kind of decision that I was not going to go down that path and so I was more in a socially acceptable, like even my mom and—I think, it's funny, I think in a lot of ways, before I came out, I got along pretty well with
my mom. Because I was staying out ‘til four o’clock in the morning, coming home completely smashed, waking up in the middle of the afternoon, and my mom I think on some level was totally cool with that. Like, “oh, you’re doing okay. I know, I understand what you’re doing. You’re partying,” you know? And she had done that probably herself, you know? Yeah.

**O’Brien:** I haven’t heard a lot about PCP in Brooklyn, or angel dust, in the 80s.

**Connolly:** It was huge. Um, I mean there were demonstrations—I ever saw in my life were marches in South Brooklyn against PCP. Parents were so frightened and shook-up by how intense it was. Like, my, I think it missed by a little bit of a generation or like a couple of years, let’s say—not a generation, a couple of years—where it was a little bit more attractive to people a couple years older than me, but I witnessed from a periphery tremendous violence, like irrationally based violence, almost like after-school special. I lived next to the bus depot, which is right off Flatbush and Utica Avenue, and next to that bus depot is the sanitation depot. So it’s this really weird, like, half a mile section where the city owns all this real estate, and it’s basically abandoned, right? Like, in a residential, people walking around. So that’s where we all drank and did drugs and partied, and so you’d see people do things like punch sanitation truck wind—uh, mirrors, which were these big truck mirrors on the side of the trucks, just, after smoking dust. Or neurologically crawling on the ground because they didn’t have the motor functions to walk anymore. And, um, yeah, it was fascinating and attractive and then alternately completely frightening. And just be like, “What the hell is, why would you want to do that?” But people were into it [laughter], I mean, they really were.

**O’Brien:** So you were, how long did you spend in this metal scene? What was the...

**Connolly:** Well, I think that, um...I’ve given, you know [laughter], I’m probably like a metal historian so I’ve given this subject a lot of thought. I think that after a few years, you saw bands like Metallica ascend into a stadium band, and other bands kind of peak or become pretty successful, and I got a little bored. But also I started to think—you know, I had these underlying gender issues. And so some things that I can mention are that I started to go to Manhattan and clubs in Manhattan. So I used to go to the Rock N Roll Church, which was the Limelight, which was like a hybrid kind of club where you’d run into all different kinds of people, including trans women, and rich millionaires in tuxedos, and all kinds of stuff like that. And then going to the Lower East Side, going to the Pyramid Club and Alcatraz and King Tut’s Wah Wah Hut and CBGB’s, and being exposed to more hardcore and punk influences. Um, yeah, so I—kind of to pivot some other stuff—so, probably around 1989, I had a girlfriend and she really liked me a lot and really wanted to be intimate with me, and I had never been intimate in a kind of pull-your-pants-down, physical way with a woman. And I broke up with her. And I broke up with her the night we saw Dead Poets’ Society, which I believe was in the summer of ’88 or ’89. And I broke up with her and I said, “I will never date another woman until I come out, as a woman.” And I immediately after breaking up with her began dating another woman [laughs]. Or I fell into the lap, so to speak, of this other woman who I met at the Limelight, who was a stewardess, actually, not from New York City. And the funny thing about her, she was a little bit more direct, and so within being with her for a couple of months and I wouldn’t sleep with her, she was like,
asking me kind of adult questions of being like, “So why don't you want to sleep with me?” and like, “What’s going on?” And that kind of now...so I broke up with this one woman saying, “I'm not going to go through this again,” you know, “I can't be in a relationship, pretend to be a boy, or a male adult,” and then I went into this other relationship and that was it, basically. And, you know, we can now backtrack and talk about other things that were happening, but yeah, I mean, that was it. Like, 1989 I was like, “Okay, I’m coming out,” like “I'm going to do this,” and I did, you know? Yeah.

O’Brien: Before you came out, tell me about encountering trans women at the Limelight, or other trans people.

Connolly: Yeah, I don’t think I have many stories. Other than, like, I remember being at the club and watching this woman dance and being like, “Oh, wow, she's really beautiful. That’s really awesome.” But not having—you know, I would say that at that time period, the bigger issue for me was the AIDS crisis and exposure to, for lack of a better term, the gay male community. But I would emphasize the word AIDS crisis as being the dominant thing. And what I mean by that is, you know, 1986 to 1990, this is like the peak of the AIDS crisis. So here you had—from a cultural perspective—you had bands like Guns & Roses and Skid Row talking about fags, you had—comedy was really big during this period and Eddie Murphy was the top of the world, but also people like Andrew Dice Clay and Sam Kinison. Hugely influences. These were like blue-collar comedy that really dr—it was kind of a new phenomena at the time. And all of them were talking about the AIDS crisis and gay men specifically. And so it became inescapable, kind of. It became omnipresent. You know, there was an iconography. Suddenly you'd come home and read the newspaper or watch ABC News and people were demonstrating about AIDS. And, you know, this was a gay disease. And so suddenly I was, here I am, this closeted trans woman, and I'm faced with thinking about this thing that is not totally...that is connected to me, in some way. Yeah. Um, so I grew up Irish Catholic. My uncle, my uncle Mike, he was, he donated to a lot of Catholic charities. In many ways, he was kind of like a saint. And one of the charities he donated to was Covenant House, which was run by Father Bruce Ritter in Hell's Kitchen section of Manhattan. And in my uncle's room, he had a pamphlet, and in the pamphlet was like a trifold black-and-white pamphlet, and it was the story of two suburban boys and the story goes kind of as follows: these two suburban boys move to New York City. One of them comes out as trans, plucks her eyebrows, shaves her legs—you know, like the Lou Reed song would say—takes hormones, and she gets AIDS and dies. And the other boy somehow finds Covenant House, is saved, and lives happily ever after. And I read that pamphlet like I read the Encyclopedia Brittanica, over and over again. And in the 1980s as a teenager, I knew two things. I knew I was going to go to New York City. I was going to do what that trans woman did. And I did not care at all if I was going to die. That it was much more...I was going to be that person and that would be the...the greatest accomplishment of my life would be to be a trans woman, you know, and so I wanted that. Irrespective of any consequence, I wanted that more than anything. And so that connects, in an organic way, to my understanding of the AIDS crisis. And you can extrapolate that to mean a lot of different things in the sense that, you know, Larry Kramer gave that famous speech in like ‘91 where he said 150,000 gay men have died in the United States. He’s not totally correct about that figure in that, of those 150,000 people, there were a lot of trans women who were misidentified. And I’m not retroactively dissing Larry
Kramer. You know, that was the time that we lived in, but our—during that period, our trajectory and our lives were very much bound up in that experience of the AIDS crisis. And that pamphlet by Bruce Ritter and the Covenant House ties it together that to be trans and a teenager in the 80s and to come out, it meant severing your ties with suburbia. It meant severing your ties with Brooklyn. It meant moving to Manhattan—metaphorically or literally—and doing all of these things that would expose you likely to sex work, expose you likely to violence and poverty, and expose you to the AIDS virus.

O’Brien: Did you make any money before coming out as trans?

Connolly: Yeah, so my dad—who was estranged and, and became kind of a frightening figure as I got older—at this point he’s getting a little older, and he still works for Paine Webber. And my dad offers me a job. He says, “I can get you this cush job on Wall Street.” And I said, “Okay.” So here I am, doing nothing—

O’Brien: And you have long hair.

Connolly: —and I have long hair. I did cut it a little bit shorter to make it look neater, but I didn’t get like a mullet or, I just cut my hair a little bit, a little bit shorter than it had been, and went into Paine Webber with a business suit on, and got a job working nights at Paine Webber for information control with this, like, ragtag group of Vietnam vets. It is not the stereotype of Wall Street that you would think. Alcoholics, Vietnam vets, all guys who lived in upstate New York—to some degree—gun nuts, first introduction to people who owned guns and were into guns. And a totally easy, cush job. And I was making a lot of—suddenly I was making a lot of money. And I worked, I had a really bizarre schedule. So I got paid—I had a full-time job at Paine Webber and two weeks of the month, I worked three days a week. And two days of the month, I worked two days of the week. And I worked twelve-hour shifts—which sometimes turned into fourteen-hour shifts—starting at nine o’clock at night, so it was like nine to nine. Which worked perfectly for my party schedule, because I would go home, sleep all day, go out and party. And I, literally, a busy week for me was working three days a week. And so I got that job in ‘87ish and that helped fund the initial, my coming-out, which involved going to see a therapist and being like, “I’m a transsexual! I’m a woman trapped in a man’s body!” That type of stuff.

O’Brien: How did you find your therapist?

Connolly: So that’s a funny story, and it’s a true story. So Phil Donahue, Phil Donahue was a talk-show host. He was kind of like...pre-Oprah Winfrey. And Phil Donahue had trans people on his show. He had Caroline Cossey, who was a supermodel. She was on one show. I saw that. And then he had like—and the unique thing about Caroline Cossey was that she was young and she had come out in her 20s, so that was pretty inspiring to see. And then, because most of the trans people that you would see on Phil Donahue were—including some people who I eventually met and became friends with—were in their 40s. They seemed old, you know like when you’re young, they were like old people. And they had kids, they had lived lives and built houses and all that stuff. So Phil Donahue had a therapist on—this is a true story—Phil Donahue had a therapist on who gave her home phone number on the air on live TV. And I wrote the
phone number down. And on a Sunday night, completely drunk, with no conception because I literally didn't know that there was a different time zone on the West Coast of the United States, I literally called this woman's home phone number, and she picked up, and I talked to her, crying, telling her I was trans, and explaining to her that I lived in Brooklyn, New York. And she gave, and she shockingly talked to me, and she gave me the phone number of Dr. Leah Schaefer, who was a direct protegé of Harry Benjamin, who was a licensed therapist and trans specialist in New York City. And that's how I got a therapist. I don't remember this woman's name, but she was a trans woman, a licensed therapist, and she gave out her home phone number in the 1980s on Phil Donahue's show.

O'Brien: That's amazing.

Connolly: Yeah, it's crazy. [Laughter] Yeah.

O'Brien: So, you started therapy—

Connolly: I did, you know—

O'Brien: —and were excited about—

Connolly: —yeah, and therapy, I'm very, in some ways, I feel important to say this. Like, I went to therapy to be trans. I didn't go to therapy to talk about my feelings or talk about—and my therapist actually wasn't there to talk about my feelings, actually. My therapist was like, “Okay. You're a blue-collar kid from Brooklyn who is living at home with their parents and this is what your life is. Okay, what you should do is go to college,” which is something at the time I was thinking about doing. “Go to college, stay in the closet, crossdress at night if you want. Go to college, get a career, and after you've established these things, come out.” That's largely—and I don't want to, I'm maybe oversimplifying things a little bit, but that largely was the messaging. Was like, you need to—and it's not the worst advice in the world either, like from a survival perspective. But from a survival perspective, I was incapable of doing these things. My alcoholism, my self-loathing and destructive behavior, my inability to connect with people—all of these things were a product of me being in the closet. So now I had opened the dam and I was going to see a therapist on the Upper West Side, and I had enough money to do this, but once that dam opened up, it was kind of all downhill, you know? It was like, I couldn't do this. So, like, I had physical manifest—even prior to taking hormones, I started to do all these things that really disturbed my parents. Like, I got my nose pierced. I got my tongue pierced. I got my nipples pierced. These are things I was doing in like 1989, and they were pretty highly unusual things to do at that time. I shaved the back of my head and dyed my hair fluorescent pink, which was probably one of the most traumatic things my parents had ever experienced in their lives, you know? At this point, I was culturally moved into the Jane's Addiction, Nine Inch Nails, gothy metal weirdness category, and these things just freaked my parents out. And I was doing all these things as a manifestation of my dissatisfaction with my body and how I was living my life at the time. So these things were kind of happening concurrently. Um, yeah.
O’Brien: So what did you do instead of go to college and be closeted and end up in a career before coming out as trans?

Connolly: So I had this leather jacket, right? And you know lots of metalheads had MCs, like, uh, motorcycle jackets? But now I graduated to this, like, androgynous leather coat that went down to mid-thigh, and on it I put two stickers. I put “Abortion on demand without apology,” which was this fluorescent orange and black sticker by the group Refuse and Resist. And I had this sticker that said “support vaginal pride,” which was by a subgroup of ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power], which was the women’s health—WHAM, the Women’s Health Action [and] Mobilization. And I had a “Silence = Death” button. And so I went to college at Brooklyn College as, at this point I was out in the sense that I started to tell my friends I was trans. Soon afterwards I started to take hormones, at very low dosages. But I was trying to assimilate into Brooklyn College, and my goal was to come out fully to the administration and live as a woman on campus. And I did that, kind of, for many years, but it didn’t really work out very well. Yeah.

O’Brien: Is now an okay time for a break?

Connolly: Sure.

[Sound of recorder shutting off, then turning back on.]

O’Brien: So you were at Brooklyn College.

Connolly: Yeah.

O’Brien: You had a really amazing jacket [laughter]...[inaudible] stickers.

Connolly: Yeah.

O’Brien: And you wanted to come out fully—

Connolly: Mm hm.

O’Brien: —at Brooklyn College, and you were on a low dose of hormones.

Connolly: Yeah.

O’Brien: What was that like? How did it work out?

Connolly: Well, I mean I think that, like, ultimately it didn’t. I think that as many times as I tried to—I think that there’s a bunch of different things that I don’t know if I have the answer to completely right, but I think some things that folks have to understand is that getting your gender identity changed was a bit murkier and unclear then. I was born in the state of Florida and so I had a Florida birth certificate. And I had an adopted Florida birth certificate, which, to
this day looks really weird. It has virtually no information on it because, you know, my, the lack of kind of backstory. I think that, yeah, I mean I think that I felt like, um...well, one is I wasn't wor—I hadn't figured out the working thing yet, right? I hadn't figured out the living and working thing yet. Once I no longer could be with my parents, no longer could be—had come out to them—they no longer accepted me, he idea of going to college was appealing. But you have to understand, as an adult, as a trans woman, I still had not figured out how to navigate the world. And I didn't even know how to articulate these things to people at the time, and I think that maybe I didn't want to sometimes, because it was so hard. But so, you know, there's the housing thing, there's the job thing, and it really took me a bunch of years—[laughter] and in some ways I'm still dealing with that today—of trying to figure all this stuff out, you know? So, I went to college, I got involved in—I met, I guess you could say a trans-identified butch, in some ways. I don't want to speak for them and their identity, but maybe that would be a fair way to describing it at the time. And this person saw my jacket and wanted to be friends with me and then wanted to know what my deal was, and, you know, kind of was a part of helping me come out. You know, this person took me to my first lesbian bars and we talked through things like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and I think the East Coast women's music festival—which was somewhere in Connecticut or something—which also had a transphobic policy, that they had went to. So, you know, trying to just figure all these things out, my identities and stuff like that. And so college, which I've tried to do a few times, never really worked out for me, so I never have graduated college. Although people perceive me as being a college-educated person, I never graduated college, yeah.

O'Brien: What were the lesbian bars you went to?

Connolly: Um, so...well, so, the one that I'll exalt to the end of my days would be the Clit Club. The original Clit Club, Julie Tolentino's club on 14th Street, where I think—well, the Patagonia store is now near it. Physically the Clit Club, which was in a basement space, is to the west of it or east of it. But I went to Clit Club a lot. I was really into the Clit Club. Went to the piers, hung out on the piers, drank on the piers. Went to Crazy Nanny's. That was a club I liked going to. And then went to the Boiler Room, which is a mix club at the time and some other bar, the Now Bar, and different bars like that in the East Village—which were more gay male dominated. Manhattan bars were very gender-segregated at the time, and also probably racially segregated as well. But...yeah, so those were many of them for sure. And then later Meow Mix—went to Meow Mix a bunch, when Meow Mix opened, yeah. But that was later, you know, Meow Mix came around a few years later.

O'Brien: How do—what were your cross-racial interactions and relationships like at this time? Like, how white were these various scenes and communities and institutions that you were in?

Connolly: So, um...I want to tread carefully, in part because of nuance, not because of fear of saying the wrong thing, right? So, I came out, and some of my first social interactions with trans people were at the Metropolitan Gender Network, which was at the Unitarian church in the Gramercy Park area and that was all white, like all—maybe not totally white, but uniformly white. Felt very middle-class, very older. I was always the youngest person in the room. And
then, and I complained about this, I complained about this to people and to my therapist at the time. And there was the Survivors of Trans—

**O'Brien:** Complained about the age stuff—

**Connolly:** The age stuff—

**O'Brien:** —or the race stuff?

**Connolly:** I would say the age and like the class identity, like where we were. I mean, again, there was a lot of boohooing. There was a lot of like forty-year-old people who were losing their families, their spouses. They had now come out to their spouses. Their spouses had rejected them. They had come out to their jobs. Their jobs had rejected them. Their children were potentially being taken away from them. And that was a lot of, that felt like a lot of space at these meetings were for that, and I had none of that. And I think there was jealousy. People were jealous of me. I was pretty and passed and, you know, was able to navigate the world. And people used to mock, really criticize me because I basically dressed the same way then as now. You know, you'd see me wearing combat boots, and no bra, and a white what some people would call a wife-beater t-shirt, and I had my head shaved. And people were like, Carolyn, you could be a supermodel, you could be walking the walls or this and that, and I was like, I was not that interested in those things, you know? And so, there was very much different experiences, you know? And like people did seem middle class, and people did have these things that I didn't have. And those were, a lot of those meetings and support meetings were that. And so then, I remember getting to go to the Positive Health Project in Hell's Kitchen, which I think Chloe was involved in pretty heavily, and at those meetings, me and Chloe were essentially like the only white people. And most of the people at those meetings were worki—all those people were out. You know, they were living as women. And they were black and Latina, mostly black. And they were out, and they were working the streets and they were having some pretty rough lives, but were super welcoming. There was never, like, any weirdness or anything like that. I met Donald Suggs, who has had many careers and Donald Suggs unfortunately passed away, and I met him at the Metropolitan Gender Network and we became friends. And Donald, I think, was the media director for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation [GLAAD] at the time, and he was very—he had gone to Yale, he was at Yale with Jennie Livingston and Jodie Foster. This is prior to *Paris Is Burning* coming out, when he was in school with them. And Donald was very connected to the trans community and interested in the trans community, and wrote about it for the Village Voice. And Donald took me to my first, like, trans bars. So I went Edelweiss and Sally's II, later on went to Tranny Chasers—yes, that's really the name of a bar. And these places were kind of like rough trade, kind of, you know—the entrance fee, mafia-owned. What we would today say cishet men would pay twenty-five dollars to get in, right? And then they would have to pay for these outrageously high drinks. And trans women—really all women, they didn't say it, you know that was not a word people used—so it was like all women would get in for free. So, I would go to these bars and, like, you could drink for free and there was an understanding that what was happening was a monetary exchange. Like, you were meeting dates and going to some of the fleabag hotels in the area—or some of the, in the case of Edelweiss, I think probably some of the back rooms—and doing stuff and maybe giving a
kickback to the bars and whatnot. Maybe not, I don’t really know. And I remember being at those bars and I remember this one woman saying to me, “Why are you here?” You know, I was the only white person in a room of 100—excuse me, I was the only white woman in the room. There were lots of white men. And this woman was like, “Why are you here?” And I was like I’m, I’m, I’m like you. I’m a t…” And she was like, “You’re not a genetic girl? You’re not a real girl?” Because those were words of the time, and I was like, “No. I’m like you.” And they were like, “Whoa,” you know? Because again I was wearing combat boots and had my head shaved and was wearing a leather jacket and just did not present in this traditional blue collar feminine way, per se. And so those were some of my experiences, you know? A lot of them were really good. A lot of them were bad. I mean, I remember being with my girlfriend in the, on the piers and running into these two African-American lesbians—bitches. And I think they had, like, a blunt or a joint and we had like a bottle of wine and so we were passing it around, and then at some point one of the two women started to misgender me. And she didn’t mean anything mean by it, but she didn’t consider trans women real women and she didn’t, like...I could call myself whatever I wanted, but at the time she didn't perceive me as having female pronouns, you know? And that hurt, you know? And I've had other experiences like that. Like, people at bars pulling on my skirt and, and saying, “You're not a real woman, are you?” or stuff like that. At dyke bars, you know.

O'Brien: Did you find work eventually?

Connolly: Yeah, I mean I did different things. Like Donald got me a job, actually, working for GLAAD, so I did that as like a media intern, a paid media intern. I worked for a law firm, like a liberally, probably state- or city-funded law firm that advocated for homeless people and for tenant evictions and stuff like that—basically like advocates for, for folks who were kind of getting lost in the system. So I did like secretarial work for that. And that became a part of my identity essentially, as I became a political activist and needed to pay the bills. I was like, “Well, I’m just gonna do secretarial work because that gives you access to a computer and to phones and to the Internet for free—and a copy machine—all for free. And I could just do those things and basically do politics and steal time from, you know...I didn't have a career in any of these times I just basically looked at these jobs as conduits for me to do kinds of social activism and stuff like that.

O'Brien: When did you start getting involved in political work?

Connolly: Early on. I mean, like, so after high school my family, you know, the IRA [Irish Republican Army] or what are called the hunger strikes, happened in 1981 in Ireland and I was pretty aware of that and...but I'm still at this point like 13 years old and, but the height of the war really happened after the hunger strikes. So, like, in that period of '81 to '88—those nine years—and I became more and more aware of those things. And my parents—who were very anti-IRA, very Catholic—still, the exposure that I was getting to stuff by listening to the news, reading the newspaper—Irish newspapers—was really influencing me. In 1988, three members of the IRA, Dan McCann, Sean Savage, and Mairead Farrell were executed by the British SAS special services in Gibraltar, which is an island, basically a UK property—sort of, sort of—off the coast of Spain. And that had a huge influence on me. That made, that was an international
incident, like a real international incident, where the, where the British government and Margaret Thatcher were cascaded by the inter—or, criticized by the international community for their behavior, and that had a huge influence on me. And after that incident, I actually wanted to join the IRA. I was very naive at the time, of what that meant, you know? But I was like, “Oh, I want to do this,” like, “I want to get...you know, subsume myself and give myself over to the cause.” And then in the summer of ’89 Yusuf Hawkins was murdered by a group of mostly Italian, but also Irish young people in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. And he was violently assaulted, beaten, and then shot to death by a group of up to 30 young people. And I was, I very much used my understanding of Irish politics in the north, and discrimination, and racism to look at the murder of Yusuf Hawkins. And I was really angry and outraged at how my mom and how my community felt about Hawkins' murder.

O'Brien: Why was Hawkins murdered?

Connolly: Because he was black.

O'Brien: [inaudible]—black racism.

Connolly: Yeah. Yusuf Hawkins was looking for a used car on some night in Bensonhurst. There, there was a ster—if you go back there is, you know, there's these stories that Yusuf Hawkins—it's sexualized. “Yusuf Hawkins was looking for a young Italian girl who he had flirted with,” but that's, you know, bullshit. He was a young African-American kid who was looking to buy his first car, essentially, a used car and so had brought two of his friends, walking through the streets of Bensonhurst. You know, it's just prior to Craigslist and cell phones, you know? So he's, like, probably took the subway and is now walking to this house in this area he doesn't know, ran across a schoolyard full of young Italian and white people. They saw him—and this paralleled my own experience with black people in my community in South Brooklyn. You know, I often say that you could not be black and walk through my neighborhood and not be physically, violently assaulted. And so, and I took that for granted growing up, you know, or turned a blind eye. Sometimes I was so young, like, what would I have done? But now it's 1989 and I'm, like, nearing 20 years old, and having adult conversations with people I was friends with, a lot of them Irish, too. And so I, you know, we all hung out, while I was going to these metal bars, we're also going to Irish bars. So Irish culture is a big thing. So, like, a lot of my friends were...you know, U2 was really popular at the time and there was an—Irish, Irish identity was having a little bit of a cultural moment at that time. And so me being an IRA supporter was actually totally fine. You know, no one cared. Didn't mean much either. Like, here I'm just like another drunk Irish kid at a bar saying, “I love the IRA.” It's irrelevant know to any Irish person, you know, what does that mean? But all of a sudden I'm like well, why was—you know, Yusuf Hawkins was murdered. Like, this is wrong. And it just got worse when political activists, probably most famously Al Sharpton, you know, they all began marching in Bensonhurst and...the community's outrage, throwing watermelons and bottles and stuff like that. And, you have to understand, I really identified with Bensonhurst. I hung out in Bensonhurst at the time, too. L'Amour's was in Bensonhurst. There's a big conduit of of bars in Bensonhurst and Bay Ridge that were—that became attractive to me as a, as a younger person. And so, you know, Bensonhurst is not like this abstract area. It's like, it's pretty far, right? But
it's still—I felt, like, ownership over that community, or connection to that community, and so I was very upset. And so, I often say to people—and I think it's true—that the Irish struggle, understanding racism, and the AIDS crisis had this dynamic effect in my coming out in some ways because I became very aware of them. And, you know, started to feel like I needed to articulate who I was internally. And I was a woman, and I was a person who didn't want to be a racist, and I didn't want to conceive of myself as that. And I think that, you know—and so those are politics that became very important to me.

O'Brien: And then where did you get politically involved? Like, what were some of the meetings like—

Connolly: Well, yeah—

O'Brien: —or protests, or other things that you started connecting to?

Connolly: So, I...so, I was working at Paine Webber and I met a group of young people from Staten Island who were the first intellectual—blue collar intellectuals—I ever met in my life. And I met them through a co-worker at Paine Webber who was into the Dead Kennedys. And he was like, “You would like my friends in Staten Island. All they ever talk about is politics.” So I went to Staten Island and hung out with them. I was working either in Manhattan or New Jersey—my company, Paine Webber, actually moved to New Jersey—and Jersey is actually not that far from Staten Island. And I had this really open schedule where I, like, work two days, three days a week and I have all this free time. And so I would go to Staten Island a lot. And so, I went to a bunch of IRA demonstrations in New York City and had no luck finding community. But I went to them, by myself, and then I met my friends in Staten Island, and I think the first things that they were into were Amnesty—which was super weird for me, and—

O'Brien: Amnesty International?

Connolly: Amnesty International. Immediately, when I started to ask, I was like, “Well, what do they think of the IRA?” And that went over like a fart in church, you know? But that was my perception of the world was like, “Oh, like, you know, Amnesty good, like, U2,” you know? I think there was a big U2/Police concert for Amnesty for South Africa and these different things. So I was like, “Yeah I'm into this, you know, the IRA, we've got to support them.” And it was like, “No. No, non-violence,” you know? So it was a very strange dynamic. So they were into the death penalty stuff, which was big. They were into homeless stuff. There was a big giant homeless demonstration, or march against homelessness, in D.C. in '88 or '89, and a bunch of my friends from Staten Island went down to that.

O'Brien: Were they in a collective together, or—

Connolly: Yeah, they were like in a weird kind of hippie, punky collective of people.

O'Brien: Did it have have a name, do you know?
Connolly: They called themselves the Group. Yeah. And there were—and they still exist, I think, sort of, but not really. Some of them are still around. So, and we did things like we went to the first Lollapalooza together, which was like in '91 maybe, or '90. We...and I was really big into that because I was a huge Jane's Addiction and Nine Inch Nails fan, and they were really into The Beatles and The Cure and Morrissey and the Smiths and that, but I was more into the more aggressive, New Wave-y music. And yeah, so we started to—so we did different stuff together. They had some art projects. I went—I began to go to ACT UP demonstrations, either by myself or with some friends at Brooklyn College that I met at different—you know, kind of bleeding years in together. And then we started to do abortion activism around clinic defense, which was, I mean, probably the biggest thing that happened was in '92 during the Democratic National Convention. Operation Rescue came to New York and targeted clinics for, like, the eight days prior to the convention. And over 5,000 people, I believe, mobilized to protect clinics across the tri-state area, but mostly, obviously, in Manhattan and Brooklyn and Queens. And I was, so me and my friends in Staten Island—oh, and the Gulf War. So we did stuff around that, so it was like a bunch of different things. And I remember I went to an El Salvador demonstration, probably in '88 or '89, at Governor Pataki's office, which was near Grand Central Station. And here I am by myself, and I'm kind of like...you know, I didn't look like people—and this may sound odd to people, but if you weren't from Manhattan, you looked really different. You know, there was a saying at the time in night—in social world—was “the bridge and tunnel crowd.” People misunderstand what that means, but I can explain it to you. The bridge and tunnel crowd were people from Brooklyn who wanted to come into Manhattan. We were viewed as inferior. We were not wanted at our clubs, and so there were door people to keep us out of these clubs. So, I very much fit that role of, like, I look like a metal head, right? And here I am at this political demonstration. I stood out. And Chris Day, who was an anarchist in Love and Rage, to his credit—there were probably other anarchists there, but to his credit Chris Day walked up to me, began talking to me, and was very kind and humane, and we had, I was actually recounting the convers—I had dinner on Christmas Eve with Chris and his family last night, and I recounted some of that conversation with Chris, where Chris was like, or, “What do you think of anarchism?” And I had just joined DSA [Democratic Socialists of America], because all my friends in Staten Island joined DSA at the time. And Michael Harrington was associated with DSA, and Cornel West and whatnot, and I was like “Well, my,” I remember saying to him, “Well, my friend says”—my friend Michael from Staten Island—“my friend Michael says I'm an anarchist philosophically, but I'm a social democrat practically.” And Chris probably could have said a million things, but he just kind of chuckled politely and warmly, and I never forgot that. I remembered that and was like—so this was my, I bought the Love and Rage newspaper. And actually ironically, Love and Rage, I believe that issue, covered trans people. And I was completely shocked. Completely shocked. And I was like, “Wow. There are anarchists and they like trans people.” And I had already looked at Michael Harrington and DSA's platform on...I think it probably said “the gay community,” at the time, and I'd looked at some other things, and so I was like, “Wow, anarchists like trans people. This is, you know, okay, cool.” Kind of made a mental note.

O'Brien: Did you get involved in Love and Rage?
Connolly: I did, I did. I, uh...So after the Gulf War and after doing clinic defense work, a lot of my friends on Staten Island had—like a lot of political activists do at times when there's peak active, peak of activism—they had completely stopped going to classes. Oh, and there were also building takeovers. Like, in '89, '90, '91, there were all, there were budget cuts that targeted CUNY and SUNY schools and at those different years—and you could look into it—there were small building takeovers and large building takeovers, meaning there were some times where the half—like, practically half the university system was shut down for weeks. And other times it was just like a building or two. And Staten Island, the College of Staten Island was actually involved in those things. They sent people to coalition meetings, but they also took over things, like their library for added study hours and stuff like that. So they were like an activist entity. And, gosh I forget where...Oh, so, so after these events, my friends were like, “We're going back to class, man. We're going to, like, we're going to put our nose to the grindstone and we're going to get our college degrees.” And at this point I still hadn't figured out all of these things of work and living, and that was a big thing. I thought we were all going to move in together. We were going to get this group home, group apartment. There was a lot of research done on neighborhoods and houses in Staten Island, but also in the Lower East Side, and squats. There were all these discussions, and they never came to fruition. And so, and I—more and more, I identified at the time with the queer community. And so they were all ambiguously straight or bisexual-identified, more in a theoretical sense than in a practical sense. And so I decided to become—kind of dive into anarchism and dive into, like, the Lower East Side, essentially. And I did. I got involved in Love and Rage, and joined.

O'Brien: Tell me about that.

Connolly: Well, you know, I...So, so again, at the time, there were probably only two political trends that I was aware of that were friendly to trans people. There was Love and Rage, and there was Workers World Party. And at some point the Metropolitan Gender Network—MGN, as it was called—moved from the Unitarian Church to the Workers World Party office. And so I actually was—I had social interactions with Lesley Feinberg, Workers World, other comrades and friends in that community, and I had a fairly positive attitude towards them. They were multiracial, they were blue collar, you know, they were really rooted in the community and really cool people. And they were hosting these meetings at their big activist center, which seemed really rad. Like, you know, big space with tons of people and offices, and these banner painting parties and whatnot. But I wasn't really interested in Workers World. I think partially that was a cultural thing. I think they, I still, I wanted to be...I had started to nurture an identity, but also I wanted to be connected to...and I want to be careful about how I say this, but I saw myself as connected to, like, the abortion rights movement and to ACT UP and Queer Nation and like, you know, and Workers World seemed to do a lot of Workers World stuff, from the outside looking in. That's what it seemed like. And so it seemed like—so I wanted to be involved in these other things, so when the opportunity and I got interested in Love and Rage, I was like, “Eff it, I'm joining.” And, you know, called up, was super nervous, and met with Love and Rage people. And, you know, almost had this confession that I'm trans and, like, this is a part of my identity. And Love and Rage I believe at the time was working on a special issue called Anarchism and Feminism. And so the Production Collective in New York City, it was only women were making the decisions, and so I was welcomed into that space. And that was kind
of, that was a little bit of Love and Rage's project at the time. So Love and Rage was also insularly—so it wasn't actually that different from Workers World, ironically. Suddenly I was put into a newspaper production scene. Not exactly where I thought I was gonna be doing with my time, but that's what, that's how I started, you know? Yeah.

O'Brien: So Love and Rage was a newspaper.

Connolly: Yes.

O'Brien: And like a national network of anarchists?

Connolly: Yeah. I think it was called, it was Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, so it was a federation of collectives and membership groups around the country and also had chapters in Canada and Mexico. So it identified itself as North American Anarchist Federation. And me having politics that were like just of the times, I was like, I thought the IRA [Irish Republican Army] were cool. I thought the FMLN [Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front] in El Salvador were cool. I thought the Intifada in Palestine was cool. There wasn't a knee-jerk anti, like, "Oh those are national liberation movements trying to form ste—new states," right? That's kind of like the anarchist motif—and I'm not going to say that's not true, that Love and Rage people didn't believe that. But there was a lot of empathy, you know, and nuance, and people were not overtly hostile. So I was able to operate, you know, working through probably some political naivete on my own part, but also people were not judging me as being backward or stupid or something like that.

O'Brien: Yeah. And what—was Love and Rage like a cadre group, or was it really open, or what's your—

Connolly: It was a little bit of both. You know, I think, like, one is obviously there's a lot of insularity to all of these groups and subcultures, and so you're really stepping through hoops and doors to get in. And I think love and rage was in a transitional period—there had been, like, some split where people left who were not as into the seriousness that the organization was going in. So, there was a ki—everybody was doing something for the organization. And Love and Rage did a lot of anti-racist organizing in these ARA groups out in the Midwest—in Detroit, Chicago, Minnesota. And...and then like in the Northeast, it was a little bit less clear what people were doing, at least when I first joined. But then when I first joined, one of the first things that happened was it was the 25th anniversary—within a year, let's say, or nine months—it was the 25th anniversary of Stonewall, which was this, which was really significant. There was a lot of dynamism in the community at that time. You know, the AIDS crisis had led to all of this social activism and growth. The modern, what we live in today is a really byproduct of the AIDS crisis. It was built out of the AIDS crisis. And so, there was a lot of energy and creativity and anger and so...So Stonewall Now happened. It was kind of like a coalition, and Love and Rage was heavily involved in founding the coalition and generating activities and brought—you know, had, like, militant demonstrations, and had speaking events, and had coalition meetings where other left groups like the ISO [International Socialist Organization] came and, you know. So I got involved in that, and I was excited.
O'Brien: Yeah. And how big was Love and Rage? How many people were involved?

Connolly: Oo, um. Gosh, I'm not really sure I could say numbers, but I would say at times it was like—we would have meetings in New York, like weekly meetings, where there were like 12 people, 14 people. Other times it was seven or eight, and then our national meetings were—obviously not every local group attended, their whole membership, but 200 people or something like that? You know, maybe, probably a lot less? Like maybe 60 or so cadre-ish type of things, you know? Yeah, and some of the bigger cities.

O'Brien: And is there more you could say about their politics beyond, like, anarchism? And enthusiasm for trans people, feminism?

Connolly: Yeah, I mean I think that the thing that I would emphasize most and I think is most of value is openness. Their, like, Love and Rage were a group of people that had intellectual curiosity and a humbleness, to some degree, and they were coming out of these new political trends, right? You know, post-70s. And so I think when you, if you were to compare it today, you'd have to say—you know, like, if you're if you're looking at a group, whatever group it is—like DSA, or whatever group it is—like, how does this group feel about the independent activities of different political forces? And what I mean by that specifically is, take something like Black Lives Matter. And it's like, not only is Black Lives Matter awesome in and of itself, it reflects self-activity and political dynamism within specific communities. And, I mean, speaking bluntly, it's like, I want to be friends with those folks. I want to work with those people. I want to learn with those people. And if we can do cool stuff together, let's do cool stuff together. And that's what it felt like oftentimes working in Love and Rage was like, you know, “ACT UP—yeah!” You know? Like, “Women's reproductive rights work—yeah!” Like, you know, “Student work—yeah!” You know, like, let's—that's what people wanted to do. Not in an opportunistic sense, but in a, we don't have—we actually do have some answers. These are some things we think about. We're right. You know, like, we certainly thought we were right about some stuff, and we wanted to work with other people, though, you know? And so that was, felt like a friendly atmosphere, in that sense. And then we were into direct action and stuff like that, which as a trans person, I could probably do a whole something on that but like—but I was into direct action. Militancy, and wanting to to be confrontational, and stuff like that. Yeah.

O'Brien: Were there other trans people in Love and Rage?

Connolly: Oh, that's, that's a tough one. Not really at the time. There was one trans person—trans woman—who came through and I actually don't even remember how they got, or, how they did come through. I did end up writing this really terrible article about myself and trans identity for Love and Rage, so you could probably find that and read that, so maybe she was...she was a New Yorker. So, she came through there. Um, but post-Stonewall—and this is a kind of an unreflected upon topic—but post-Stonewall, I think I lost some connection to the community. And I think that—like, I think what I'm trying to say is I became immersed in the anarchist community, then I became immersed in the CUNY student movement community, and I was less connected to the queer activism. And I think that partially has to do with the
fact that the women, excuse me, that the the queer-identified people in the Love and Rage milieu were all, like, cis-identified assigned female at birth. It's so funny using this language, because it's not language I ever thought about or used at the time, but I think that there were some hurdles and disjunctures, and I think we oftentimes didn't know how to communicate and connect with each other. And I think there was a lot of fear. I'll give you one example, which would be—out of the milieu that we were in, some women in Love and Rage formed a direct action collective. I can't even remember the name of it, which is telling on some level, because I have a pretty good memory. So, here were some friends of mine—assigned female at birth, lesbian, queer-identified people—they formed this direct action, anarchisty thing, and the big thing that they would do...or, I don't want to exaggerate that and offend them...was they did a lot—they got arrested a lot. They would do these demonstrations and they would, like, chain themselves to things, which, you know, these things were direct action tactics at the time. And I could never do that. I was deathly afraid of being arrested by the police. And so, they may have invited me to stuff—in fact, I'm positive they did. But I could not articulate to them and connect with them on an emotional level and explain to them that, like, I don't want to be involved in this. I'm afraid of this. I can't be near this. You know? And that happened in other contexts, too, around demonstrations at Republican National Conventions and stuff where, like, I did a lot of...I did some things that were not exactly legal at different times, and definitely put me at risk of arrest, but I also was pretty aware of the potentiality for me to arrest. And the idea of intentionally getting arrested was out of the question. I would never put myself in a situation where I was going to like sit down in front of the cops and put my wrists in front of me and tell them, “Go ahead, arrest me,” because I didn't want to go to jail and be put in a male jail cell. Yeah.

O'Brien: Where was your transition physically at this period?

Connolly: I've been on hormones for probably 28 or 29 years. I don't remember exactly the dates. Let's say around 1990. So, like I said, you know, I did a, without makeup, I'm not—I definitely went through a makeup phase actually later in my life, but you know, I pretty much was a plain jane kind of girl—but I always passed, even before coming out. And so I was really tall, that, you know, certainly a defining feature of of whatnot. But I had not had, I didn't have any money still. And so I took hormones, which were a financial burden and that was it, you know? Yeah.

O'Brien: How long were you in Love and Rage?

Connolly: I was in Love and Rage probably since, so, '94, some time in that period to...Love and Rage fell apart, disbanded in whatever it was, '97, '98. Yeah. '97, I would say. Yeah.

O'Brien: And what was your position in relationship to it falling apart in '98?

Connolly: I was one of the people, like, that—there are other people, male people, that were, that are very well-known and but I was one of the people who was pretty prominent in the organization. Love and Rage sent me on a national speaking tour to represent the organization during the Republican and Democratic National Convention in '96. So I had, I was pretty
prominent. I wrote a lot for the newspaper and, you know, I was...I became attracted to Maoism specifically, through the student movement and my roommate at the time, and began kind of conceiving of a shift in my political—I was kind of always a bad anarchist, and Love and Rage always was accused of being cadre-identified and Leninist-influenced anarchists, and I definitely became an embodiment of those things that people did not like. You know, I went from being into the IRA and the Intifada to starting to talk about the Young Lords and the Black Panthers and these Maoist-influenced national identity groups that were around in the post-1960s. And yeah, I was impressed by them and thought those were really cool and, and started to go in that direction.

O'Brien: And there was a Maoist circle that sort of emerged—

Connolly: Yeah, yeah—

O'Brien: —towards the end of Love and Rage?

Connolly: Yeah, me and my roommate were—you know, my roommate had been really around the group Freedom Road Socialist Organization and influenced by both them and the RCP [Revolutionary Communist Party] and even MIM, the Maoist International Movement, at least on an intellectual level. And, but also had had positive interactions with Freedom Road Socialist Organization in the Midwest and in the Northeast, and so really brought—and, in the latter years of Love and Rage, particularly in New York, we got really interested in organizing methodology and organizing theory. And we began by looking at Mao and other things, What Is to Be Done, by Lenin, and then we discovered a document that had been written for the Freedom Road Socialist Organization—or actually, it might even have been for the RCP—on the mass line, and that was a huge influence. Like, I was super blown away by that document and...yeah I was like “whoa,” it was kind of like light bulbs going off. You know, it was the right place at the right time, and so when we did the speaking tour, I went out West and spent some time in both San Francisco and San Diego and ran into, randomly in the street in San Diego, outside of a—not outside, at a Pat Buchanan rally—I randomly ran into a friendly woman in the streets of San Francisco, streets of San Diego, who ended up being a part of a group called STORM: Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement. And I had read STORM's founding documents that year, and all of a sudden I'm standing next to this woman—I'm really tall, this woman's my height—and we were looking at each other eye-to-eye, which this is a tall person's reference, right? Like, I'm looking at this woman eye-to-eye, and she's in this group and she's like, “You want to go back to our hotel and hang out and talk about STORM? There's a bunch of STORMistas at the hotel.” And I'm like, “Yes. Let's leave the Pat Buchanan rally,”—you know, I think we were observing slash protesting—and went to meet a bunch of STORM people. Super cool folks who were like, “Oh, you're doing CUNY student organizing? Awesome. You're an anarchist? Awesome.” And that became a new layer and relationship. And STORM had some Paulo Friere, Maoism, you know, “serve the people,” these different influences, and so—and they were also pro-trans. They were all also—Van Jones [laughter] used to be like, “Carolyn, and you need to start the trans ACT UP! Carolyn, you need to start the trans this!” You know, Van was super like—saying stuff like that, you know, in '97 and '98. Like, “Carolyn, why don't you build a direct action trans group and we'll all work together in these different
identarian—there's a very different conception of identarian movements working as, in cohort or conjunction with each other. You know, like, there was racial justice day in New York which was like, it was an Asian group and a Puerto Rican group and there was a black group and it was this group and that group, and all come together to do something, right? And there was a, there was a moment at that time where I think that's what, a lot of what Van was thinking of and that was some of the work of STORM in the Bay Area. Let's do the—you've got the Filipino groups, you've got the labor centers, you've got the black police brutality stuff—let's, like, let's all get together and work together and build a radical progressive politic, you know? It was pretty inspiring, pretty cool, at the time. You know, new ideas coming into the mix for sure.

O'Brien: So was there a formation that you were a part of coming out of Love and Rage? Did you join any of these groups or...?

Connolly: It's kind of amorphic, and I think we, me and a friend from Love and Rage started working with some people in Freedom Road Socialist Organization in New York, and we were like studying together and doing stuff together. And then there was a collective called the Little Red...Little Red something, Little Red Cell, in New York, which was basically like a study group. We hung out and we were kind of hoping to form some kind of STORM kind of group. And...and I still, actually—to be honest with you—I still was struggling with work and jobs and stuff like that. And now I'm getting older, and being a student was not appealing to me anymore. And also being around so many people that didn't understand trans stuff. Now I had become—I went from my anarchist bubble where people, there were a lot of people who identified as queer to this CUNY student movement milieu where people...it was two steps removed, right? Like, no longer—I would be in a room, a coalition meeting, or a SLAM [Student Liberation Action Movement] meeting with 40 people, and no one else in that space identified as part of the LGBTQ community. And I was, I was committed to it at the time, but it definitely wore on me. And so, I think that this—I was also a little unhappy with my transition. And so, it was a tumult—so there were new kinds of tumultuousness in my life at the time.

O'Brien: So this is the late 90s?

Connolly: 90s, yeah, the late 90s. And so I got involved in Freedom Road Socialist Organization and started to do political organizing with them. Was not exactly completely happy in my life, though. And family members of mine began to die. My aunt—my dad had died, my grandmother had died, and now my mom died, and my aunt died, who was the person I was closest to. And I was definitely in an unsatisfied place, unhappy place, politically. And through no fault, per se, of the political work. Although the landscape began to change at that period too, but I was definitely, began being unsatisfied. Which kind of culminated in 9/11 and my mom dying. My mom died in in 2000, and left me a twen—unbeknownst to me—left me a twenty thousand dollar insurance policy, which was...and so suddenly, I came to the realization that I could have SRS [sexual reassignment surgery] or GRS [gender reassignment surgery], as it's called. And then 9/11 happened and...and then right after, soon after 9/11, I had surgery. And then right after I had surgery, my uncle died, who was the last immediate member of my family. And that kind of closed a bunch of, created a bunch of shifts in my life, including me moving away from revolutionary-minded, socialisty-, anarchist-minded political activism. I kind of
made a shift away from that during that time period. And some of that was to take care of myself. Some of that was to be destructive in new ways. You know, suddenly I had a pussy, and I, like, had a new sense of adventure, and I was really positive, but also I, you know, there was a little bit—I still had a self-destructive streak running through me. So that existed there as well. But yeah, that's kind of, I kind of made a shift in 2001 away from kind of one kind of politic, and kind of moved back, sort of. I got a job at Babeland—which at the time was called Toys in Babeland—and became a prominent queer person. Began reading and performing, talking about trans stuff in public for the first time, and started to do that, yeah.

**O'Brien:** So there's a lot more I want to ask you, and I feel like you just rushed through, sort of, '98 to 2003 or so. And then, we still another 15 years after that.

**Connolly:** Yeah.

**O'Brien:** We're a couple of hours in, [Connolly laughs] and I think I need to get some food. Do you want me to do a part two of the interview this afternoon or another day? What do you feel along those lines?

**Connolly:** I'm open to anything you like. Totally happy to do whatever works, you know. Yeah, I mean, I have some I have some time, like an hour now. And then just keep in mind that I'm probably not going to be back in New York City for potentially months so, yeah.

**O'Brien:** Okay, well, let me, let me stop these and get some food and we can. [Sound of recorder stopping and starting again.] Okay, so just before the break, you were very quickly running through the rapid deaths of multiples of your family members—

**Connolly:** Yeah.

**O'Brien:** —and then you being able to get bottom surgery, and then moving into a somewhat more destructive, less political phase. [Connolly laughs.] [Inaudible] When, when were the deaths? Between...?

**Connolly:** Yeah, so my aunt died in the summer of 1998. Two years later, my uncle died on Holy Thursday, which is, what would that be...so, I'm Catholic—or, I'm not a Catholic, but that, you know, you always remember that—which is the day before Good Friday, which is right before Easter.

**O'Brien:** It's like April, or something.

Connolly: April, yeah. And then my mom died in March two years later. No. Excuse me, I apologize. My mom died in March of 2000, which enabled me to have money for surgery, and then my uncle died in April of 2002. So, yeah. Yeah.

**O'Brien:** What was that like for you, having all the family—
Connolly: It was bad, you know. It was really bad. You know, I think that my mom—when I came out to my mom, my mom was like, you know, “I will never accept you. Over my dead body will I ever call you a different name.” And I knew my mom was telling the truth. And it's taken—I can say aloud that I know my mom loved me. I can say aloud that I know my uncle loved me. I can say those things, but there's a lot of pain connected to them because, when they told me they weren't going to accept me, I knew they were telling the truth. And so—they did things for me. They gave me money. They, they wanted me there for Christmas and such—despite the fact that there was this gender disjunction and, you know, physical disjunction, and different names—but they, you know, would not accept me at all. And that sucked. That really hurt. You know, and obviously has been a throughline of pain and difficulty in my life. I think that I grew up in a very provincial, blue collar, Irish Catholic community. You know, you live at home until you get married. You get a job, and you keep that job until you retire. And that was not only a—that was a reality, right, for some people? That was what they thought. Like, you know, you go to church, like all these things...I grew up, you know, and you could say if I wasn't trans, would that have been my reality? Or if I wasn't adopted, would that have been my reality? If I didn't—if I wasn't Irish and wasn't exposed to the political struggles in Ireland, would that have been my reality? If the AIDS crisis didn't happen, would that have been my reality? Obviously it wasn't, right? Like, all these things rippled through my life and changed my path. But that's very much the associations that I have and the—I am friendly with some people I grew up with, and they very much, you know, they have two or three kids. They take their kids to Catholic school, and all those things that they've retained a lot of that blue collar, Irish-Italian tradition, in a way. In Staten Island they live, or New Jersey, or so on and so forth. Yeah, but I separated from those things. I detached myself from the people I grew up with. You know, in a metaphorical and literal sense, I went from Brooklyn to Manhattan—or, ironically, I went from Brooklyn to Staten Island in a funny, which is kind of funny. But yeah, and those set me on a different path, and created a social disjunction that I struggled with. And so losing them all was very painful, and still is very painful, you know? Those things will never leave you. [Pause.]

O'Brien: So, why did you drift away from politics?

Connolly: Yeah, I mean, I think that like again, like, um....I was continue—you know, there's lots of different...I mean, I think again it's not a singular thing. It's a bunch of things, right? Like, I still, it took me a long time and to have a career or careers. It took a...I was frustr—New York is a hard city to do politics in. I mean, we could do a whole conversation on New York City being a hard city to do politics in. You can feel very socially isolated here. You can end up living—and, you know, it's a big freaking city, you know? So, I didn't know what I wanted to do, right? And how I wanted to do it. There were discussions of getting, becoming a postal worker, becoming an MTA worker or, you know, those things weren't as attractive. I ended up going the non-political, secretarial route, you know? And different people and my cohorts, my friends, they found different places for themselves, a lot of them in academia, a lot of them in teaching. And those were paths that seemed...you know, they were not attainable to me any longer, or I wasn't attracted to them. Those, that career path and so, yeah. Yeah, so I didn't know what to do politically. And we, I found myself doing work around the nation of Colombia, in solidarity with the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia / Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia], in the late 90s. And almost, I mean, to be frank, almost conceiving of ourselves
rebuilding a CISPES-like [Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador] national solidarity network in support of the FARC.

O'Brien: Can you say what CISPES is?

Connolly: CISPES was the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. So, a really remarkable and in some ways underexplored network and organization that worked in the United States for, you know, much of the 80s and whatnot, until the end of the war. And—tellingly, perhaps, although for different reasons—after 9/11, the United States put the FARC on the terrorist watch list, which then created a ripple effect in terms of... Colombians who wanted to do that work in the United States were very afraid. We were afraid that we, that some bad things could come down on us if we were doing that work, and so—but that work is also hard, too, and complicated. And I went from wanting to do student organizing to, you know, to being in this Colombia stuff, which is—has a different flavor. It's just a different flavor of the left and CUNY, the CUNY organizing had this kind of face-to-face, impacting the practical needs and desires and visions of people living in the city that I was living in. To then thinking about working with Colombian Americans, and Colombians in Colombia as a non—I'm not multilingual. I still couldn't get a passport at the time, or I didn't—I actually probably didn't perceive I could get a passport at the time, so I didn't think of myself as being that type of person that was going to, like, adventure in Colombia and, you know, hang out in Farlandia and check out the revolution. Those things seemed ephemeral and distant to me, so the work didn't have the same appeal. And then, with September 11th happening and feeling really like the wind was taken out of our sails, in a bunch of different ways. I also worked by the World Trade Center. I don't want to over, like, I don't want to sound whiny and dramatic about this, but working near the World Trade Center is a very specific experience after September 11th. Everything below Canal Street was closed to tourism and pedestrian traffic, except me. Me and people who worked down there were allowed below Canal Street on a daily basis, and I was able to walk to the World Trade Center each and every day after 9/11, and it had a huge impact on me and my coworkers. And again, created another weird level of of stuff to think about. So, you know, but then I had surgery during this period, so I basically took a sabbati—I, I lied to my boss and implied that I had some form of ovarian cancer and I had to have a procedure. This was all plotted out with, like, therapists, who coached me on ways to not lie and whatnot. Ways that, like, would not make me look like I was completely lying to people's faces. But I took a sabbatical from work—my job as a secretary at a real estate agency in Lower Manhattan—took a sabbatical obviously from political organizing, and had this insurance policy and had surgery. And, you know, and knew during that period that I was not going to continue to do political work like I was doing, I was not going to really—I did go back to that job, but knew that that job was now...You know, I was keeping that job because I was having surgery. And so I was ready to make some changes, yeah.

O'Brien: What sort of firms were you working at as a secretary?

Connolly: Lastly I was working for a real estate agency in Tribeca, one of the top 10 real estate agencies in New York City. Working with celebrity clients and a lot of wealthy folks for retail,
residential—not commercial—so retail, residential rentals and sales, and I worked as like the office administrator, essentially. Yeah.

O'Brien: Yeah. So after surgery you started having a lot of sex?

Connolly: Yeah, I had a lot of sex, I was super excited. You know, like, I was kind of, had a bounce, you know. I remember going to Pride—I think it was actually even prior to surgery, so this would be like six months before I had surgery—and marching at Pride. And there was still a Drag March then. This was like, I think this was like the moment where the trans people in the trans community were starting to say, “Well, like, okay, we’re gonna go to the Drag March, but we’re talking about trans issues at the Drag March, right?” Whereas the Drag March was a little bit more like a countercultural festival night on a Friday. You know, it was Friday night was the Drag March, Saturday was the Dyke March, Sunday was Gay Pride. And I remember going to the Drag March that Friday night and seeing my ex and seeing, like, part of my community. And I remember talking to my ex, and my ex being like, she, they could tell I was excited. You know I was, I had a bounce in me, because I knew my surgery date was coming. X number of months. I think it was, I think my surgery date was in November—yeah, my surgery date was two months after September 11, so in mid-November. And I was, like, psyched, you know, super psyched. Yeah. So that was a big deal and having surgery and, you know, I was now willing to put myself in a space or—and it was still really hard, both in a confidence level, and also just there were, there were not really any trans women in these spaces—but I just started to be like, I want to be in these—I want to be seen as a sexualized lesbian queer woman, and I wanted people to really know that. And there were spaces that, like, both were more more friendly to trans women, implicitly or explicitly, and then also that had people that were more psyched for me to be there. So that was cool. Yeah.

O'Brien: Yeah. I came out as a queer woman in 2000, or as a trans woman in 2000, and in the sort of network of anarchist punk scenes I was in the West, there weren't a lot of other trans women [inaudible].

Connolly: Yeah. Yeah, for sure. I mean, you know, there were like sex parties. There was SPAM in New York, which was a multi-gender, multi-sexuality sex party run by lesbian-identified women, largely. And then there was...I can't even remember the name of it now, but there was a lesbian party. Which you were allowed to go to if you were trans if you had surgery, although there were trans women that went that didn't have surgery, but the idea being that you weren't, you weren't allowed to pull down your pants unless you had surgery.

O'Brien: Right, Submit had that policy.

Connolly: Yeah, Submit, that was Submit. Yeah, it's run by the same people.

O'Brien: A big fight over that policy—

Connolly: We had big fights with them, yeah—
O'Brien: —over the years.

Connolly: —argued with them. And some of those people worked at Babeland, which I ended up working at, and so they cross pollinating fights over Michigan [Womyn's Music Festival] and Babeland's participation at Michigan, and also the policies at Submit. Yeah.

O'Brien: When did you get a job at Babeland?

Connolly: So, I got a job at Babeland soon after Babeland opened its expans—Babeland went into an expansion period, and opened its second store in New York at Mercer Street—which I believe was in 2002, but I may be wrong about that. And I had met a friend of mine, through reproductive rights activism, I had—and a person who was in STORM, actually—who was associated with both Good Vibes and Babeland in the Bay Area. And so the story goes—and this is a true story—so, I left my job at the real estate agency. I still had some money left over, and I decided I wanted to be this trans writer and I wanted to...I didn't know what I wanted to do with the job, and I was in an S and M store on a bright September sunny warm day, probably in September of 2002, and in walks the owner, one of the owners, of Babeland with my old friend. And they were like, “Well, we just opened a new Babeland, you should come to the opening party. It's happening tomorrow night,” or something like that. And I said to my friend, “I think I should get a job at Babeland.” And they were, like “That's a great idea. You should get a job at Babeland,” and—or, Toys in Babeland. That's what I was called at the time. And I said, “Great.” And within, I don't know, a week or two, I had a job interview and then I was hired as a part-time person at Babeland, and then I was hired as a full-time person at Babeland, then I was hired as their education coordinator, then became the marketing and education coordinator, and then eventually I left the company, yeah.

O'Brien: Why do you think they were enthusiastic about hiring you?

Connolly: Oh, I think well one is, this is a friend, like, a political activist, a person who identified as, you know, like some kind of anarchist or red person. And they knew me as a person, as a human being, and they were like, “Yeah, you should, you know, you should apply for a job there.” And I think Babeland, I mean literally, I mean Babeland doubled. When Babeland opened its second store in New York, it literally...maybe even more so, but literally doubled the size of the New York staff, but that actually almost doubled the size of the entire company. Like this—or, you know, 25 or 30 percent. The company suddenly was having a growth period, you know?

O'Brien: Did they have stores in the Bay Area at this time, or outside of New York at all?

Connolly: Yeah. The original Babeland was in Seattle, and then they had warehouses in Oakland, and then they had the New York store in the Lower East Side, and then they opened a store in SoHo. And then they opened a store in Los Angeles, which ended up closing. And then they opened a store in Brooklyn, I believe, which was after my time. Yeah.

O'Brien: What happened to the Seattle store?
Connolly: It's still there.

O'Brien: Oh.

Connolly: Oh, yeah. It's still there. That was the first Babeland. It's still there.

O'Brien: Okay.

Connolly: Yeah.

O'Brien: So, what years were you at Babeland?


O'Brien: What was the workforce like? Your co-workers?

Connolly: Way younger than me. I was older than anyone but the owners. You know, you have to understand, when you applied for a job at Babeland, they got a lot of applications. It was a sought-after position, and they were able to kind of strain through those applications to find the person that would best fit the company. So, it was kind of a cool place to work. There was some prestige attached to it. You know, at the time I think I might have been the first trans woman ever hired by Babeland? There were certainly trans men...yeah. There were certainly, at this point, as I recall, trans men or, yeah. Who had different kinds of identities, because they had come through the lesbian community and had deep connections to that community. So, it was slightly different. Like, in ways that have a lot of nuance, but so I was the first trans woman, as far as I know. There might have been someone else, but as far as I know, I was, yeah. And again, that's one of those dynamics, like being in Love and Rage, like being at, in the student movement, like being at all these spaces where you're the only person of your ilk. And so, I've had enormously positive experiences, I had enormously weird experiences, and then I had many negative experiences, some of which I wasn't even able to articulate then how negative they were because they were so unique and new, you know? If that makes sense. Yeah.

O'Brien: And you started being a public trans figure.

Connolly: Yeah. Yeah, for sure. I mean, I think people would very much say that. You know, I started to do poetry readings and public readings. I...I did, um...we did fundraisers for Camp Trans. I ended up co-hosting a trans reading series in New York. I did a trans tour of the United States and into Canada with three other trans writers, and—

O'Brien: Did that have a name, or have—

Connolly: I, it probably did. I don't remember.

O'Brien: —or maybe Google?
Connolly: Yeah, I think it had trans in the title, probably. But yeah, with Tennessee Jones and Charlie Anders, and I believe there was another person on the East Coast and another person on the West Coast, yeah. It was a heady time. I was doing all these new things. I was taking on these new roles and speaking about stuff and I felt like, in many ways, I felt really good about myself and in other ways, I had found myself drinking a lot again and hanging out with people who were drinking a lot and partying a lot again. Yeah.

O'Brien: What were some of the tensions or debates or, like, open questions being worked out in trans communities that you were in at this point?

Connolly: Well, I think, and again, like, one thing would be... So I felt really lucky to be allowed in these spaces, and I felt really privileged. And there's probably some passing privilege there. There's like the privileges of being able to have surgery, but like, so all of a sudden I felt really lucky and I was, uh... And so what this meant in practice, to a certain extent, was... I had already come out, right? Like, this is 2000. I had come out a long time before that, and I wasn't dealing with a lot of these same issues that other younger trans people were come out with. And I also didn't have a lot of support, and there wasn't a lot of oxygen for me to talk about the issues that I had faced, or that I was facing then, in the community. So, there was a lot of anger. I definitely felt a lot of anger and rage, and I didn't feel a lot of solidarity from other people. And I also didn't feel like people understood me and respected—like, I think, yeah. So there were a lot of really complicated feelings. Like, I came out in this— I was a very blue collar, Irish-Italian, working-class, transsexual woman, or trans woman, and I did not necessarily fit. Despite the fact that there was more openness, I did not fit into this world in the same way. And there was not the same understanding about things that, like, you know... And that's why Michigan [Womyn's Music Festival] is worthwhile talking about as a symbol, right? Of different dynamics that existed within the community, right? I also felt fetishized. Like, I used to make jokes and say, “I want you to fetishize me.” Like, “Love me,” and use those words kind of in a punk rock or angry way. But I didn't feel loved. I didn't feel welcomed. In a practical way, I felt like a lot of people wanted to fuck me and saw me as a science experiment. I would go to these readings out in the Bay Area, Portland, and I could sleep with someone [Connolly snaps her fingers] like that, you know? But I felt like it was almost like an experiment, like people were saying they could do it or had done it, and that people didn't really connect with me.

Connolly: So... help me understand that, the mismatch. So it seems like there is a mismatch in there. The age difference, that you're older. Class, that you're blue collar and working, from a working-class background, and also a gender difference of there being not a lot of trans women in the scene?

O'Brien: Yeah. Well, not a lot of gay men either, like cisgen—I mean, like Babeland is this manicured space, right, where it's it wants to see itself as queer, it wants to see itself as feminist—and it is those things. I'm not trying to take those things away, right? But it is a, it doesn't have... these are, you know, we come to the table with different things, right? And so as much as I don't need to tell people all about every element of my background, there is a way in which my background was made invisible, because of how different people were. And I think a
lot of blue collar people at Babeland struggled who were assigned female at birth—you know, cisgendered lesbians, or cisgendered bisexuals. I think people really, there, as much as you could say that there was a desire for diversity, what you had was a culture that was somewhat dominated by a certain lesbian-with-a-capital-L tradition. Cisgendered-lesbian-with-a-capital-L tradition. And so it was, talking about things like Camp Trans and Mich Fest was hard. Talking about trans women's sexuality was hard. And Babeland had a really hard time diversifying their staff. Both racially, class-wise, and getting more trans women and trans men, too, into the fold. You know, for sure.

**O'Brien:** What were the relationships like between this sort of well-articulated queer world that you, that had this trans presence, and then other trans women's communities in New York?

**Connolly:** Well, it's hard, you know? Like, I'm not going to lie. I think that it's really hard to have your fingers in everything. I don't know if I thought there was a trans women's community in New York at the time. Not one that I interacted with. I didn't know lots of, like, there were...And it's really important to know that I came out prior to the Internet and the Internet still...it's not something that I'm fluid in. I think, like, StrapOn.org had a huge influence on me. It introduced me to the terms trans and non trans, which—

**O'Brien:** I was very active in that.

**Connolly:** But I wasn't very, I mean, if you looked, I don't know if there's archives, you probably could see, my participation was very minimal. I read a lot, but I didn't, like, I'm not a very, I'm not a good typist and articulator of my views. I can talk pretty good, but I'm not really good at typing out my views and stuff like that. But I was influenced by that stuff, and that's where I first recognized that there were other trans women who were lesbians, and met some of them. There were trans women from D.C. who came north to Submit, and I socially interacted with them. And met trans women out in Camp Trans who identified as lesbian, or met trans women who were out in Portland who identified as trans women and identified as lesbians. But I felt like I was the unicorn and felt like no one used that identity. And I think that makes sense, to a certain extent. I think a lot of trans women are, perceive of themselves as default heterosexual, in a cis sense, in part because trans—being trans can be so consuming, especially when you come out, you almost just let everything ride. Like, you know, you're just kind of doing so much work to transition that sexuality may—for some folks, not everyone, obviously—may be a less explored thing, you know? I always identified as a lesbian, but there were only different points that I actively engaged. Other times I just kind of coasted and was like, “Yeah, I'm a lesbian,” because I was just so consumed by other work of my identity. It was easier, too. You know, it's like, being six-foot two, being close to 200 pounds, it doesn't matter that you pass in the world. In lesbian spaces, I'm always going to be the tallest, the biggest, the girl with the biggest feet, the biggest hands—these are just physiological, objective realities. And so that made me feel like a little bit of a space alien, or separate. There is a little bit separateness there. Yeah. That's a lot, but [laughter].

**O'Brien:** No, that's great. I started coming to Submit in 2003, coming up from Philadelphia.
Connolly: Oh, wow.

O'Brien: And then was very active in Submit, from like 2004 to 2008 or so.

Connolly: Oh, wow. That's cool.

O'Brien: And it was one of the reasons I moved to New York.

Connolly: Oh, wow. That's awesome.

O'Brien: To be able to go to queer women's play parties, which I was banned from in Philly, you know, as were all other trans women.

Connolly: Yeah. Yeah, I mean I tried to join. I was a member of the Lesbian Sex Mafia. I was, I went to all the parties. I wanted to volunteer, like, I wanted to immerse myself in that kink community and I definitely felt really isolated and disconnected. And these are, some of these experiences—I went to LSM [Lesbian Sex Mafia] meetings and parties prior to surgery and kind of played a very off-to-the-side role, but then I was very active after I came out and had sur—excuse me, after I had surgery, but I still felt very much on the margins of those events.

O'Brien: My partner led the effort that overturned the “no trans women with their pants off” rule.

Connolly: Wow.

O'Brien: Um, at the time.

Connolly: That's awesome.

O'Brien: She was on the board—Emily, yeah.

Connolly: Oh, that’s awesome.

O'Brien: Yeah, I think that was two thousand, I don't know when, six or seven something. Yeah.

Connolly: Yeah, wow.

O'Brien: How did this scene—either at Babeland or in this trans circuit you were in—how did it change over the time that you were a part of it?

Connolly: Well, I mean, I think that, like...a lot of people will say Babeland when corporate during this time. Babeland changed. But, like, I think that is focusing the microscope too closely. There were a lot of changes happening in the community at those times, and Babeland was being moved by forces that are just bigger than all of us in terms of society and whatnot, and what it means to be in these subcultures. And I think that, like...I think that for me
personally, I became really burned out and felt like I put myself out and wasn't getting the return that I could have. And I think that people—and there’s been some, I’ve had some closure and resolution, but a lot of the close friends at Babeland that I had during that time period, people that I call, I called family, I no longer am connected to. And that was really traumatizing. I think that, like, as you grow older and you learn more about yourself and others, like, I left New York...A lot of people would perceive me leaving New York for the mountains of New Paltz as this bold, visionary moment, you know, with my hands held high and marching into the mountains for this new moment of my life. But a lot of it was, my tail was between my legs, and I was done. And I had concluded at that time that I was an alcoholic. I had started to conceive of my identity as an alcoholic—like, that I had a problem. And that, I realized that I was super co-dependent on people in my life, that I was super drawn to both very destructive people—and I love these people, so I’m not trying to be mean, because I’m destructive—but super destructive people, and people who are drawn to alcoholism. And so these are my own baggage and my own problems. And then also peo—a community that couldn’t see how fragile that I actually was, you know? And so people did things, and it almost sounds like gossip, but people made me feel less welcomed, people made me feel less connected. There was—this was the trans male revolutionary moment where trans male identities became really prominent in queer spaces and I felt very much erased. Not by those trans men, because those trans men oftentimes really wanted to be my friend and really wanted to—obviously they were dealing with their own baggage, but they were still, like, they saw me as this beacon, like, “Holy shit there’s a trans person. They’re older than me. I’m connect, I want to be their friend.” But the community, I felt very much alienated by. And again, like, in the most blunt ways of describing it is you had lesbians who were like wanted, were super psyched to fuck and marry and be in relationships with trans men, and those folks did not want me in their, they didn't want me in their community. Or if they tolerated me in their community, they didn't want me, they didn't love me in the same way. And, and so as confident and as badass—you know, and I have a, if there's a throughline, I think a lot of people would be like, “Carolyn’s a badass,”—but people don't understand is that, like, I was super damaged goods, I was super raw and so, you know. And so I couldn't handle the disjunctures and rejections. And, you know, in the anarchist community, and this is like, you're taking a step back, in these different communities that I participated in...my transness, and my wholeness of my identity, probably was a little bit on the back burner a little bit. Subsumed by these other dynamisms that were going on. But at Babeland, and during this time period performing, writing, I was as true to myself as I could ever be. And it was rough. Again, like I wanted family, you know? Like in a communal, some kind of alternative family sense. And I felt lost when I didn't get it, you know? And so, I was burned out and traumatized and I left the—I left Babeland and I left New York, and just kind of jetted out of the city.

O’Brien: What year was that?


O’Brien: I, um...My experience in moving to New York and during my years in Philly in the early 2000s was that there was this trans community that was very well-developed and had these
political dimensions—particularly New York, where there's organizing—and that trans women were a symbolic part of it, but not really welcome in a substantive way.

**Connolly:** Yeah.

**O'Brien:** And that there was very little language to acknowledge that, or think about that, or talk about that. And that really only emerged in the last few years, like, a recognition of some very different trajectories and experiences between trans masc people and trans feminine people.

**Connolly:** Yeah, no, it's really true. I mean, there were some, again...I think it's important, Babeland tried to hire some trans women that went, that didn't stick. They couldn't stick, they didn't fit. Bryn Kelly was hired and I was really burned out and on my way out, and I think I was—I'd like to believe that I was friendly to Bryn, but I was not. I did not try to befriend Bryn. But I was also—I mean, I don't know what our, how long we were past, how long we were there at the same time—but I was kind of done. And yeah, it was, I think that people—I was really sad when people didn't realize that I was, you know, running away from the city and running away from that community. I used to joke and say to people I retired from the queer community, and that was my way of saying, like, “Yeah, I'm done.” You know, “I can't deal with this anymore.”

**O'Brien:** You and Me and Bryn all overlapped in New York for three or four years as far as trans women, on the older side, dealing with serious stuff, mental health-wise—

**Connolly:** Yeah.

**O'Brien:** —in, uh—to varying extents—in this dyke-dominated world as leftist people. And offhand I can remember meeting you, and remember meeting Bryn a couple times, but I'm not sure I ever had a conversation with either of you.

**Connolly:** Yeah. Yeah. No, for sure, and me too. I mean, I don't remember ever talking and having a conversation with Bryn, you know? I remember, I remember meeting you and I don't remember having a conversation with you, you know? There were a few people on StrapOn that I became friendly and friends with, and tried to. But even at Camp Trans, there were very few trans women, there were very few trans lesbians. They're very...yeah. So, still at that point, the 2007 period, when I, like, you could say I'm officially out of New York at that period, there was just not that much.

**O'Brien:** What—why do you think that was? That trans women in this sort of dyke, trans men's world, or queer world, were not able to connect with each other?

**Connolly:** I think a lot of it's fear and transphobia, internalized transphobia. I think also, I mean, I think, just taking a step back—I didn't think I was going to live very long. I didn't think, I didn't, like, reading that pamphlet by Fa—you know, by Covenant House, I thought that there was a...like, I was a perishable fruit. I was a perishable piece of meat at the supermarket. That I was not going to last very long for this earth. And so I would make friends in the trans community,
many of whom were sex workers, and I'll be blunt, I thought that people were going to die. And I didn't know...I was sometimes afraid of that. Like, I didn't know...I made excuses, and then I made excuses for myself when somebody would reach out and I would have a connection. I'd be like, the two of us together raises the possibility that we're gonna get clocked, or harassed, or abused in public. And I was a chicken. And I was a...you know, I think I was...[laughter, and crying] You know, you know, like, ashamed of myself. For not doing a better job of, and not prioritizing people in the community, because I was just so afraid. And, and you know, we...life, you know, is just hard, you know? So I didn't do a good job. And yeah, I mean, I think that for me personally, Bryn's death has had a huge impact on my life in ways that I think are overwhelmingly for, for positive. It made me realize that, like...it made me realize a lot of things, including the fact that I wanted to give back to the community, and wanted to be rooted in the community, and that I didn't—I no longer saw my happiness as being something that I wanted to live, uh, find individually, but I wanted to find in the community and share and connect with people. And I didn't want any more people in my community to die needlessly. But, maybe that's not the right word, but I just wanted to help people live [blowing her nose].

O'Brien: Were you able to do some healing and connecting up in New Paltz?

Connolly: Yes, and...life is complicated, you know? Yeah. Very much so, you know, I...went from, I'm heavily involved in the trans community in New Paltz. I'd like to consider myself a leading person there. And I, we have a support group, which I help run. And I got to go to the TGNCNB statewide leadership [New York State Trans, Gender Non-Conforming, and Non-Binary Advisory Group] retreat, collective gathering that happened this past September in Hudson, New York, which brought together over 55 trans-identified people, gender-nonconforming and non-binary folks to—through the state—to help strategize, and heal, and connect with each other. And I really look forward to continuing this work. I also have a better sense of how to have some balance, I think, around this work and political activism in general, and how it can fit into my life in a way that doesn't consume me. I hope, fingers crossed. And I read and, you know, am an activist in the community there. So, I feel really happy and proud about that. And I do try to connect with folks in New York City, because there aren't a lot of queer-identified trans women, and lesbian trans women, in the Hudson Valley that are in my age group that have had some similar experiences, and so I try to come down and do some readings, and use Facebook in a positive way, and other forms of social media to connect with people like yourself. And yeah.

O'Brien: What inspired you to agree to do this interview?

Connolly: Well, I mean, I think that I do sometimes feel like a really lucky dinosaur, or a really lucky unicorn, that has managed to stay alive. And and it's sometimes amazing and I feel so...You know, I'm literally floored when all these different cultural things happen, and nodal moments in our culture, around trans rights and trans culture and stuff like that. But, you know, it's just the desire to get it down, and to share, and to think maybe there's some value in understanding. I think, like, for me personally—and I believe this, right? Like, I believe that, I believe in intersectional politics because I believe that I lived my life at the intersections of politics, and that I found—I wanted to be a feminist. I wanted to be an activist. I wanted to be
these things because I felt like they were necessary for my survival, and necessary for my entire people's and community's survival. So, yeah.

**O'Brien:** Thank you.

**Connolly:** Thank you.

**O'Brien:** Anything else you'd like to say?

**Connolly:** [Laughter] I don't know. Thank you!