NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

KAMRYN WOLF

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien and I will be having a conversation with Kamryn Wolf for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library Community's History Project centered on the experience of trans identifying people. It is October 29th, and this is being recorded at NYU Department of Sociology. Hello.

Kamryn Wolf: Hi.

O'Brien: How are you doing today?

Wolf: Doing alright, doing alright.

O'Brien: Well let's start off; what are your preferred gender pronouns?

Wolf: Yeah, I use they/them pronouns.

O'Brien: Excellent, excellent. And are there any sort of broad descriptors of your gender identity that you feel comfortable using?

Wolf: Yeah, I identify as trans and non-binary.

O'Brien: Excellent. Where did you grow up?

Wolf: I grew up in a small suburb of Cleveland Ohio called Shirin Falls. It's like a little super white conservative Christian little town that has like a waterfall down the middle, and a gazebo and an ice cream shop, where I grew up.

O'Brien: Wow, do you know how your parents made a living when you were born?

Wolf: Yeah, my mom--they met through work--my mom worked at United Way, doing fundraising and my dad worked in accounting with, I think at the time, Nationwide Insurance [inaudible].

O'Brien: Interesting.

Wolf: Kind of boring, but yeah. [laughter]

O'Brien: What was your--what do you remember of your family's dynamic when you were young?

Wolf: Young, like child young?

O'Brien: Yeah.
Wolf: I have one brother who is two years younger than me, and I was really close also with my mom’s oldest sister, my aunt Eah who was not married and didn’t have kids. And my mom grew up in Wooster, Ohio, about an hour and a half south of where I grew up. My aunt Eah would come up often and cook food, take us to our sports games because my parents both worked a lot growing up. I feel really lucky at this point having a really solid... deepening the intimacy and honesty with my parents, it was pretty hard for many years. As someone who wasn’t at the time identifying, obviously, as queer or trans but who didn’t fit the gender norms of what was expected. And they’re both, like, my dad’s side is Jewish, my mom’s side is Greek orthodox. My mom was the first person in her family to go to college and she then got like a master’s degree. They’re both kind of on both sides, very, like have assimilated into this like WASP-y culture. That was another strand of it being hard. I also went to a quote unquote “all-girls school” from sixth grade to graduation, which has other layers of experience of otherness and outsidersness. And growing up in the suburbs unless you had a car it was pretty isolated going to this private school half hour away. Yeah. The suburbs are miserable [laughter] and beautiful at the same time. I think where I grew up is really beautiful. I have such a soft spot in my heart for wide open highway vistas. But, yeah...

O’Brien: So, you’ve mentioned gender dynamics in your family, what were you probably like as a child?

Wolf: well I’m a Leo, and that I feel like was [laughter]— so what was I like as a child? I was the ringleader of different friend groups. I was fairly femme as a young kid; I wouldn’t wear dresses unless they twirled. I did ballet from ages like four to twelve. Was also a smart kid and an ambitious kid, did well in school. Yeah, I think as soon as like puberty hit, and I mean, I switched schools from public to private school in the sixth grade. And that shift, with puberty and this new school where everyone kind of knew each other, many people had been there since they were like two years old, and their like sisters went there, and their mothers went there like legacy type school spot, and all the sudden getting acne [laughter] yeah puberty is like so rough, it’s so rough, bodies can be so grotesque, and beautiful for sure. But I can’t imagine, as awkward as it’s been going through this second puberty, I have so much sympathy for my eleven and twelve-year-old self going through it for the first time. And when I switched schools, I embraced this weirdo persona, as a way to kind of like cope mostly feeling lonely and isolated. And I’ve like always had good friends, a handful of good friends that were like total weirdos.

O’Brien: Did your relationship with your parents and your aunt shift in puberty and when you switched schools?

Wolf: Yeah, I mean my mom started working, she didn’t work for some part of my younger childhood and went back to work when I was like ten or something like that, so yeah the onset of puberty and transferring to this other school and her going back to work and I think at the same time my parents’ marriage having a lot of challenges and my dad’s alcoholism also becoming more and more of an obvious issue, they all kind of conflated, but it all happened at the same time so I think it’s hard to sort out what their responses were. And I remember like getting my period for the first time the day after Christmas and telling my aunt, my mom’s parents both died before I was born so my aunt is kind of like—I feel like she probably plays a
role that some people who have loving grandmothers play. And I'm her favorite, it's like, very obvious and like probably really fucked up [laughter] like that's the family truth, but going up to her, when she stayed at our house she stayed in this top attic space and going up to her room and being like, “I think I got my period...” and I felt so sick the night before and it's very much like you're a woman now congratulations this kind of—yeah. They're Greek so they're very loud, she's very like, loud she's very adoring and very smothering sometimes and she would want me to put makeup on and I remember using Nair as, the hair removal stuff, as a young person and that being very encouraged. She would want to put my hair in rollers, which part of me loved it. And my private school had uniforms too, it was this very clear thing there was a catalog where you could order the skirts from and your button downs. The cool kids shopped at Abercrombie and had their moms sew their skirts really short—I don't know. You asked about my relationship and how it shifted with puberty, I think, yeah, all these things happened at the same time and eighth grade was really the first time I saw a therapist. I was feeling really depressed and suicidal, and that's also a part of it. I don't remember as a 13 or 14 year old more details than that, but it feels like all the sudden everything was terrible. [laughter]

O'Brien: Tell me more about the difficulties of your private school experience from sixth to twelfth grade.

Wolf: So, it was a school...well, so I think there's a lot of different things. It was both like athletics were really celebrated and supported, so if you played lacrosse or field hockey, these kind of prep school type things, there was a lot of support and air time for that kind of stuff, and science was the other major thing that a lot of school cultural attention towards. There wasn't a lot of—there certainly was never a women's study course or like why are we all together as girls why does that matter? And of course I feel really like as someone who fantasizes about queer separatist spaces [laughter] trans separatist space I don't necessarily think the experience was bad but, I remember really struggling with this prep school funneling culture. It used to be you would go your senior year or junior year you would go to the headmistress and—this was like back in the 80's, like, not that long ago. You'd go to the headmistress and she would tell you if you were just going to get married after you graduated or you whether or not you were going to go to Smith [laughter] and then get married. It was very, yeah, this school that was—I don't know, didn't feel like it took seriously our creativity or our power as young women unless it was being kind of funneled or kind of fell into one of these socially acceptable categories of what success or whatever looked like. I remember my senior year of high school I tried to—I started a petition; it was a tradition when you graduated fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades that you wore white dresses and carried bouquets and it was just [laughter] like this is ridiculous, we're scholars we're not fucking brides to be, so sign this petition to have us to wear caps and gowns and I think of my graduating class of 75, I think maybe 18 people were in support of, like, early feminist stirrings like this gender stuff is fucked. [laughter] I'm swearing a lot, I hope that's okay. [laughter]

O'Brien: You can swear as much as you want.

Wolf: [laughter] Okay, and I think I was a smart kid but also couldn't—was so miserable and so much didn't make sense, rules didn't make sense to me. I was the kind of kid who would say I
was going to the bathroom and leave the school and miss an hour of biology—I don't know. I've never been very good at [laughter] doing things that I don't think were important. So that obviously got me into trouble sometimes.

**O'Brien:** What was your experience with gender like and how people related to your gender during your teenage years?

**Wolf:** It was such a weird—all of us being in like uniform—and I think that's one of the things that I actually look back and I'm so glad that there are in some ways in which that environment that in so many ways was so stifling or hostile and conservative. I mean yeah—it's just this weird thing where I have these conversations with friends about how beautiful women's bodies were and so much more beautiful compared to men's bodies were. And I think the two out people who I can remember like, there was one who had friends and was cool she was part of a clique of basketball girls and the other one was like totally, ostracized. This really latent attraction and touching of each other's—physical intimacy, it being totally divorced from a queer identity or a lesbian identity it's just very stark and I think as far as gender, anyways, I guess I went off on a tangent, the school was fairly small and intimate, I mostly knew everyone so you'd have like, groups of friends just laying in a floor somewhere, like in a hallway like, it wasn't—we kind of rejected—my friend group did this social decorum of like you sit in chairs? [laughter] We'd come to school and I really don't remember caring about what I wore, even in high school I'd come wearing my brothers sweatshirts and my old polos from middle school and at a certain point I remember feeling very casual and laid back about it. And even something like, I don't—there were many months at wintertime, I wouldn't shave and that within my friend group, at least, of other weirdo's was fine, it was okay. So, I think my experience with gender in that environment was, at least my memory of it, was more it wasn't a visceral experience of feeling like, not at home in my body or feeling like gender in another kind of way, those feelings didn't really, didn't show up until after college but it was more so this kind of, was always tied to these politics and to these expectations of what a woman was supposed to do with their life or what a girl was supposed to do. That kind of internal culture at the school, but then these kinds of expectations from my mom and aunt being like, 'why the fuck aren't you shaving?', 'you should put makeup on', or 'here's some perfume', 'were going to your grandparents can you look nicer' [laughter] and that kind of stuff. I remember my mom got mad at me because I didn't go to prom. She was like, "people are going to think you're a lesbian" and I'm like, so what if they think I'm a lesbian? And the truth of it was that I was going down to Columbia with my friend, Tim with my other friend who ended up, this other boy who ended up dating. I don't—we went and smoked weed and saw movies and biked around Columbus, Ohio [laughter] and I was like, no, but like, so what! Yeah, yeah...

**O'Brien:** What did you do after high school?

**Wolf:** I went to Wesleyan University in Connecticut where I majored in Art History and German.

**O'Brien:** Were you shifting or growing during that time in yourself?
Wolf: Yeah, I mean I think...yes, yes and it took a while, I think the first couple years of being there. Kind of like the same thing, had good friends, had close friends, mostly did well, but it was also being very depressed and very anxious and was just emotionally not doing very well. And then my junior year I studied in Berlin for the whole year, in Germany, and had panic attacks for the first time—it was a really—I was very much alone. Berlin in winter is just miserable, it’s cold and icy and dark. And there were a couple of experiences I had with men that were sexual assaults, or there’s that and then also experiences that were just annoying [laughter] and dehumanizing in other ways. And at the same time having very few friends, there was a woman, Clarice; she was a French woman who owned this vegan tart shop in my neighborhood where I would spend a lot of time. And she was this fat femme punk and had bright pink hair and would always wear combat boots and fishnets and had face piercings and was just so frickin’ hot. And I definitely—I spent so much time in this café and again, wasn’t identifying as queer until, basically until returning to Wesleyan in the fall. I was like, ‘I don’t want to date men anymore’. But I think there was something about her shop—even just looking back, I decided to take these postcards and it wasn’t until months later, I’d be like, oh “Oh-la-la Tart” like, yes, there’s this like, butch woman with a mustache making a pie [laughter] and that was her marketing material. And I Googled her and she turns out to be this burlesque dancer and rad anti-fascist, dyke, and I wrote her a secret love letter—not like a secret love letter but kind of a “by the way, you were really important to my queer identity” and she responded and we followed each other on Instagram and it’s very lovely. But, I think that it was very much that being away and kind of being very alone and mostly very unwell but with...something about that tart shop and something that experience with sexual violence kind of came together and that fall I did find myself a girlfriend [laughter] and that was the beginning of my figuring out what it meant for me to identify as queer even if I think that there has always these strands or presence of gender conformity and certainly feminist rebellion.

O’Brien: You’ve mentioned struggling some with depression and anxiety and other things over this arc of your teenage years, in college. How do you understand all that looking back on it, like, how do you make sense of it?

Wolf: I think I am someone who is very absorbed or like absorbs other people’s feelings or is hyperaware of tension in spaces and is also very driven towards care work. So, in my family for example it was like—I don’t think that I necessarily even knew that my dad was an alcoholic when I was—I don’t think I would have used that term, but he would come home from work and drink beers and walk around and doesn’t say hello to anyone and kind of is like a zombie in from of the television, like that, absorbing that and the same thing with my mom she would come home and then from work fairly late and would chain smoke cigarettes in the garage while playing computer games and then fall asleep on the couch. None of it was [laughter] warm or loving or caring and I think also in my WASP-y type culture way of suppressing the family narrative and the status quo being so, maintaining that and maintaining the appearances. Especially my mom, her job is fundraising, she just goes around and hob knobs with really wealthy people and gets them to give her money. And so there are ways, in which starting to feel depressed, but what is this or how to name it. I remember when I told my mom, finally, I buckled down one day and just crying and saying something’s not right and she took me shopping [laughter] and its hard, how do you-how does one who is clearly struggling with so
much then support your kid who is very much still a kid with something, anyways, she wasn’t particularly—my family wasn’t particularly—that’s the word I want to use?—tolerating difference or being open to pain or things that are hard and they’re changing, they’ve changed a lot. But I think a lot of that struggle with depression and anxiety just stemmed from taking in all that and internalizing it as if it was my fault. How much more then, basically was more or less you know, what I was told when I was in college when I came out to my mom it coincided with my dad had been sober for a little while. And then over Thanksgiving break my brother found a not particularly well hid 24 pack of beer in the garage and remember being—my brother being like, oh, I found something and me storming and bringing it in tears and my dad was in bed and I was like, ‘what is this? [laughter] what the fuck is this?’ and that coinciding a couple days later with my mom getting on the phone and me being like, finding out that she had known; she had known and hadn’t told any of us and kind of made this comparison to you think it’s painful for your dad to be drinking how do you think it makes me feel you’re a lesbian? And you’re like, whatever. So [inaudible] internalized feelings of responsibility or blame for not being able to hold the family together as the favorite child, as the child who is super extraverted and knew how to entertain and knew how to make people feel good. It was very much then it was directly told you’re fucking it up, you’re fucking it up for all of us. I think a lot of the struggles with depression and anxiety have to do with this like, needing individuation like needing to try all these different moments to have an identity that felt that authenticity is complicated but felt true, felt grounded in who I was and my desires were and what my experience of the world were and throughout adolescence and early adulthood, kind of every one of those attempts kind of being shamed by my family of origin and feeling that’s kind of how I make sense of that.

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

Wolf: I moved to New York a few months after graduating, like a few months after graduating from undergrad.

O’Brien: Why did you move here?

Wolf: I moved here because I had thought that I wanted to pursue a career in the arts or having majored in art history and one of my best friends had found an apartment and one of my best friends from college found an apartment and she was like, you should move here with me, you should do it. So the first year I kind of initially moved here for her and a bunch of different arts related gigs and just hated it [laughter] very quickly stopped. Realized that was not the world I wanted to be a part of.

O’Brien: What year was that?

Wolf: 2012.

O’Brien: What was challenging about the art world?
Wolf: Just how much it was driven by money and appearances and PR and a particular kind of social and cultural capital that I both didn't have and wasn't interested in getting or cultivating. And at the same time, I guess, in late 2012 early 2013 I started volunteering at Third Root Community Health Center and when their—the person who had been doing their administrative work left, I got hired to work there it was a really nice, it felt like a shift into work that was community based, that was queer, the cooperative business model it felt like a different way of talking about and thinking about not just money but resources. It was a work environment where you would walk in your coworkers would ask me, ‘how are you doing?’ and [laughter] they really wanted to know how I was doing.

O'Brien: I think Third Root is important to some trans communities in New York in a number of different ways and I'm not aware of an interview that's talk about it at all. Can you us a little bit about the history of Third Root and where it is and what it does and how it sort of intersects with queer and trans communities?

Wolf: Yeah. Oh gosh yes, I'd be so happy to. Third Root was founded, I think, in 2007 by a group of people one of whom being Jacoby Ballard who is a trans herbalist, yoga teacher and Julia Green--I think was--I don't know what pronouns Green uses—Green now lives in the West Coast but I think another GNC identified or queer identified herbalist. Julia Bennett, a black lesbian acupuncturist and I forget who else was in the initial cohort of people but it’s located in Flatbush and this cooperatively owned business that does sliding scale services kind of massage, acupuncture, yoga, and herbalism are kind of the main things and it really addresses the holistic and tries to serve both people but also ailments that are left out of traditional western health care system they have a huge volunteer base that has historically helped with different things including administration and front desk stuff. They have—Jacoby started doing and have still done since Jacoby's left, a trans yoga class that was certainly one of the first place that I ever came to understand myself as a spiritual being. It's very dear and precious to me for that reason. It was a really powerful and very complicated community of people, I think being a holistic health center, I think increasingly, has over the years as that neighborhood on Cortelyou Road has become more and more gentrified, this kind of shift of clientele has become more and more white, more and more wealthy and so it's how do you actually, as a community, center who wants to be serving folks of color, the Caribbean community that's in Flatbush, queer folks and trans folks who don't have as much access resources generally, to be able to do things like acupuncture or—I don't know, just like, take care in general. It's hard and it's complicated and it's a messy place but it's also one I know has really been instrumental in the healing journey's of so many trans and queer folks and I loved working there. I was almost there for two years, it's an incredible project and they're really struggling now to stay afloat and to kind of really be living their values structurally but also in a sustainable kind of way.

O'Brien: I saw a somewhat frightening fundraising email from them recently.

Wolf: Yeah, it's hard. It's hard living in capitalism and trying to be a collective business. When some of the owners have multiple jobs, the cooperative, multiple jobs and dealing with housing crises themselves and some of them are disabled and aren't able to work enough hours. And there's a constant flux of different volunteers and yoga teachers and it's hard. And I think very
much unclear what will happen but from what I can tell I actually ran into Emily Kramer, who is one of the current collective owners, it was perfect actually I was thinking about how its stressing me out to make time to see friends because of graduate school and just happen to run into her and we both had 45 minutes and going to this little lunch spot. And I said, 'do you want to sit down and have lunch?' and was like, 'Totally!' she said she seems like—she said there’s a lot of community volunteers taking initiative and stepping up and forming different committees of fundraising or marketing or people want to make a video, so it seems like as it should be right if it is going to continue to exist it’s going to need to have more people in that process, more people keeping them accountable, being more transparent about the things that they need help on but also more transparent on the ways that they’re not doing what they should be or could be for their community or the community they hope to serve. Emily seemed really stressed but like hopeful, so who knows?

O’Brien: So, what did you do for work after getting alienated from the art scene?

Wolf: So, I was their administrative—I think my official title was coordinator of community and client needs.

O’Brien: So, you transitioned from volunteer to staff?

Wolf: Yeah so, I was--was not part of the cooperative and so was part of--

O’Brien: A staff member?

Wolf: Yeah, and I like would train volunteers, trained and recruited volunteers, trained staff, did front desk, just general front desk stuff, helped them revamp their sliding scale process, co-wrote anti-oppression training for staff people. What else were some big projects there...I think that was a lot of it. And I did booking and scheduling both for individuals and for classes.

O’Brien: How long did you do that job for?

Wolf: About two years and then right after that, switched over to Babeland.

O’Brien: And how many trans people would you say got involved with Third Root in one way or another?

Wolf: Let’s see, on the collective staff from when I first started there in 2013 I think a collective staff of six or seven, two were trans or identified and a kind of a regular small, but definitely a present number of TGNC volunteers. Some of whom are super active parts of the community and then a fair number—I definitely saw more trans people at Third Root than [laughter] I would see anywhere else. I don't know how to quantify or describe it [laughter] they were there. They came for services, they were service providers.
O'Brien: A volunteer could interview them, it would be really nice to learn, to have an archive of the history of that place and its work I think it's really quite remarkable, the development of trans health care in New York.

Wolf: Right, that was a huge part of what Jacoby tried to, and I imagine is still doing, is herbal care for people who were having, I think it was top surgery. It was this kit that we sold that had a ‘zine that went along with it and different salves for wound care and um yeah, so it was...

O'Brien: I lived with Jacoby for a bit, a long time ago...

Wolf: I just want to kind of then bring into the room Geleni Fontaine, who was the other—I'm not exactly sure everyone who was involved there, so I might be missing people, but Geleni certainly has been there since I was. I mean, we got involved in 2009 or 2010 but they—they're an acupuncturist, disabled GNC, queer person of color who's just like, receives—if you were ever lucky to receive a treatment from Geleni it's really incredible. The amount of thoughtfulness and precision and they're so calm. They're a Capricorn [laughter] very, very grounded in that. So, I think it's an amazing thing. I was the youngest person there; I was 22 when I started working there, 23. I think Julia was the oldest person, she was in her 60's, Geleni, I think, was in their 50's, and there were a couple of folks in their 40's, a handful of folks in their 30's. It was not just a very queer and like multiracial mixed class space but also a very intergenerational space which I think to be a coworker of other trans and queer elders was just so meaningful and so shaped who I am and my sense of history, my sense of humility, and certainly am not, there's a lot of things I wish I could be doing and should be doing, and can be doing for queer and trans elders but it's an incredible and really powerful space. I really feel like, that, if my junior year of college was like the first time I was like, “oh, yeah, I'm queer” and oh, yeah, I was totally like lusting after Clarissa, the tart shop owner and working at Third Root was the first time I like I understood my queerness as having potential healing—healing potential. In and of itself; it being a spiritual power a spiritual asset, not to use financial terms to [laughter] describe queerness but having, like healing power and potential and a sense of coming together as a family, especially when my family of origin stuff was particularly hard at that time.

O'Brien: Was your gender identity developing during your time at Third Root? Or shifting?

Wolf: There was like—I don't think I really came—well, I shaved my head for the first time when I was working at Third Root and I got way more femme after that, which was fun. And also around that time, in early 2015 started dating trans masculine person, trans man and was also living had been living since 2013 at Divine House, which is a 20 person collective living situation.

O'Brien: [inaudible]

Wolf: Huh?

O'Brien: Where is it?
Wolf: It was in Clinton Hill. It was majority queer also had a bunch of different; a bunch of TGNC folks was also a mixed-race, mixed class cooperative space. But I think it was like really being in this relationship and then eventually working, starting to work at Babeland in the fall of 2015, that my sense of trans-ness started to emerge, I started to have like vocabulary for it.

O’Brien: Tell me about starting work at Babeland.

Wolf: It was—sorry—I had known Lena Solow from, actually from undergrad, we both went to Wesleyan together and took some dance classes together, which is funny...

O’Brien: That’s right, she’s a tap dancer.

Wolf: [laughter] Yeah, we actually we took modern dance classes together. But, she loves tap. Which, I’ve actually never been able to see her perform, but I like, that’s ridiculous, that needs to change. Lena hooked me up with an interview and got hired; I guess it was in like October, I started working in November. I worked in the Brooklyn location which was a 17 min walk from my house and it was awesome. I didn’t know anything, I had never worked, I mean I guess in some ways Third Root was retail I mean we were selling services and in some cases there was like product but a really different kind of experience than Babeland which was selling high end, I mean trying to sell high end, luxury, and I say luxury in air quotes because I believe everybody deserves to like experience like sexual pleasure and have fancy vibrators and dildos and whatever the fuck they want to fucking with. But in the sense of like, these fancy, fancy products. So it was my first time really doing something like that but it was amazing. I think I started working on weekends and then Monday and Tuesday nights, which are really dead especially in winter. And nights we would have two customers from seven to close and so it was a lot of listening to Dixie Chicks [laughter] and Dolly Parton and parading around and getting nerdy about astrology with coworkers and, yeah. I think at Third Root even though I wasn’t doing medicine kind of stuff, it felt like doing care work because people would come in and they would often be in pain or they’d be dealing with whatever chronic or acute illness even if I just scheduled appointments or was taking payments like the kind of hospitality and the kind of patience and compassion, I took that very seriously that part of my job and I think similarly at Babeland too, my retail persona was very much like caretaker of, ‘What’s going on with your body? What’s going on with your relationships?’ I mean I wouldn’t like straight up ask that but if it was my work at Third Root definitely informed how I worked with patients, I mean clients—customers at Babeland.

O’Brien: What was the clientele at the store like?

Wolf: It was like a lot of Park Slope moms, Park Slope ladies; using ladies again in air quotes but that’s the stereotypical image that pops up. A lot of folks, a lot of cis folks, a lot of straight folks; we would have a brunch crowd that would the rowdiest we would get on Saturdays and Sundays. I feel like the Brooklyn location had the reputation for being kind of quiet, way more quiet and certainly less punk, less grimy. The Brooklyn store when I was working there had a very boutique-y feel it might have been a little like size wise a bigger than the Rivington store. It was very well lit, kind of glass displays and shelves, it felt like polished for that kind of like,
Park Slope, so like middle upperclass clientele, which I think Babeland mostly kind of serves anyways youngish, straight, cis women.

O'Brien: What was the culture of queer and trans people in the staff, like what role did queer and trans-ness people play in the work?

Wolf: I mean, I feel like almost everyone there had identify, I think actually in my personal store I think Babeland was the first time that I introduced myself as using they/them pronouns. But still going by my given name, but it's like almost—I'm struggling to describe what role it took, but it just was—it's kind of describing what air feels like [laughter] it's just there its everywhere. But there were people, many of my coworkers, their queerness and their transness and they’re sexuality were really primary dimensions of their identity or how they kind of organized their understandings of self. And were kind of, I remember it being a vulgar space too sometimes and in a way that is not—I don't mean to be demeaning in any way, it was a great, it was like yes! We’re gonna talk frankly about this stuff, we're gonna make jokes about—our frickin', I mean our organizing slogan was “Fists up for Babeland”? [laughter] I mean it's just, it felt really like an incredibly liberating space. And it wasn't like we were all like, fucking all the time too, we would have conversations of not having had sex in months, and how our relationships were really hard, or asking questions—I remember one time I was like, what happens like, I didn't know. I mean certainly my sexual life and as I was at Babeland and gained access to both free shit [laughter] free like toys, and information, was learning like about kink and learning about BDSM, that I think my transness really emerged from my like, sexual practices of dominance and submissive play, like power play that was happening in my relationships. Anyways, it was just being to ask questions like, “what happens if you fart when you have a butt plug in?” [laughter] it was just like, that was normal, like “I don't know, let's Google it!” [laughter] or you know, we would test out products, like I knew my close friends, one of my closest friends at the Brooklyn location, we would just text each other these long, “Oh my God, I tried this the other day.” , “I masturbated with this toy,” it was just knowing the intimate details and it not being weird, it not being invasive, it just being a really important part of how we understood bodies to be in the world, and desire to function, and what love and tenderness could look like. That just took on a whole new shape at Babeland. And I think too, our queerness and our trans-ness, the way we dealt with customers who were misogynist, or who were transphobic, or who were racist, were the ways in which our shared identity really transformed or kind of manifested into really caring for each other and caring for our coworkers when fucked up shit happened, which it did on a fairly regular basis with creepy men, calling the store and jerking off on the phone, or coming in and, this happened more so at the Soho and Rivington locations, where they would be people who made overt threats in the store, but...yeah, I think those were the ways in which too...we really had each other’s backs, and that became an, I think, organizing tool eventually.

O'Brien: Yeah. So, there were several different pieces there that you touched on, and I'm just trying to think about teasing them out...so one, what do you think was the meaning of queerness and transness was for the cis straight customers that weren't too bigoted that would come in and like wanna shop at Babeland? Like what would that mean for them?
Wolf: I mean there were certain friends of mine, I think I did this sometimes too, I'm thinking about like...there were a lot of high femmes at Babeland, like really who used their queerness and their femmeness as a way to kind of intimidate customers into buying things, or listening to them, or that being a weird way of establishing power, in the space? I think there's a way in which queerness for better or for worse was read as cool and trendy? So, I think for our straight, cis, certainly our park slope type folks, there was a way in which it was maybe read as—I don't know.

O'Brien: Was there a sexual skillfulness associated with queerness, something like that?

Wolf: Probably. I mean certainly like, this was the other strange thing too, about being in that shop, like, I don't know how many of our straight cis customers would come in and knew that we were all queer. I have this tattoo on my upper arm that's done by Noelle Longhaul, who's an incredible trans tattoo artist, and it was not intended to be, from the outside, to be incredibly cunt-y, but it's this kind of coral, watery, squirt-y, like it feels very—it's an incredibly queer tattoo. And there would be so many cis men who would come in and be like “I love that tattoo what is it?” and I'm like [laughter] “It's whatever you want it to be!” like, I'm just—so I don't know the legibility of queerness, or naming of queerness in a particular way, like I'll go home and—I actually think I was growing my hair out when I worked at Babeland, but always understood myself to look very queer, like I don't think anyone could imagine me being anything other than that, but actually I don't know if our customers....there's such a direct... if it was so direct as that. It was kind of like, here's these people who look really hot, who are not afraid to talk about buttoholes or about orgasms or about flogging or whatever, they're actually really patient and really knowledgeable and savvy. And I think too like in the kinds of educational thing, and I, whatever, say education in air quotes, the education that [inaudible] was kind of entertainment, these 20 minute minis were kind of just, like short little sex spectacles or shows, there was a lot of jokes and humor was really involved, even in our longer ones too, we took it seriously but it also was very playful and I think even if there were times when queerness was used to intimidate or establish power and authority there were also these other moments of making it hopefully really accessible and making it playful and actually something you could, that anyone could go home and experience pleasure for themselves. I don't know, both of those things.

O'Brien: That's so interesting.

Wolf: And I'd imagine, I think the Brooklyn location, I'd imagine my coworkers at SoHo or Rivington probably had a really different experience. I'd be really curious to hear how they answered that question, because that was the other thing too even when there'd be like a dyke couple that would come, it was always really important to us in our educational work and our sales work to never assume how someone would be using a toy, or what that person, what they would want, based on how they looked. It was assuming that even if there were two people that we read as women, came in. We don't know who they're having sex with, or what parts they have, and that part is irrelevant to us, right? So there was this way too that our interactions with customers sort of put onto them a queer, we interacted with them in a queer way, that was non-assuming and I think maybe planted seeds. Someone being like, ‘oh, I want a new toy’,
'okay what kind of toy do you want?', 'I don't know' and then you had to ask questions. “Do you want to use it with a partner?”, “Do you want to it internally or externally?”,”okay internally, do you want to use it vaginally or anally?”, like all these kind of questions that I think made it abundantly clear to people the abundance of ways that bodies come together and the fact that there's not a clear direct path towards pleasure. I think that's another way in which our queerness was filtered into the space, but was never directly stated. Like, oh, here's these two dykes, but at the same time when people who I'd read as queer came in I'd be totally, like, really excited to help serve them and personally I—with queer folks, young folks, folks of color, I'd give them my discount [laughter] it felt really important, I don't know, mini ways of doing reparations, very mini, but it always felt, for me, really important. I think you're gay, I'm going to give you this discount, it was just like, I got this in friends and family you know...yeah.

O'Brien: You mentioned the importance of queerness in established the solidarity with people when you’d face difficult situations. Before the organizing started, do you have any examples of that?

Wolf: I should say I knew about the organizing before I started working at Babeland...

O'Brien: Why?

Wolf: Because I was so close with Lena.

O'Brien: What was the state of it when you first started working?

Wolf: What was the state of it? It was very much at its beginning shape. I think it was still—Brooklyn had not really been organized at all yet. I think there had been a couple of attempts made with certain coworkers, but none of it totally stuck, or no one who had been really convinced to sign on to be part of the organizing committee. I remember going to an early meeting and it mostly being SoHo, or maybe exclusively being SoHo and Rivington folks. And sort of still a group of, a fairly small group of really committed folks from the get go. So, it was a process of moving from the sure bet people, the people who were like, “Yes, we're definitely going to be on” like, the ones who it's not super hard to organize with, and slowly starting to spread out, I think that's where we were.

O'Brien: And did you see when you got the job, did you see your own role as really advancing and working that effort? That you'd been a [inaudible]

Wolf: Yes and no, I definitely remember being on the phone, maybe it was even, on a phone call fairly early on with Steph, who was one of our union reps and being like, “I'm not really an organizer, I just really hate organizing, I'm just really not good at it”. So I saw my being there as wanting to help or being committed at least in a vote kind of way, and certainly when we would have new hires definitely. I did a lot of that at the Brooklyn location. I was pretty instru—I don't know, I don't want to like—it was such a collective effort and such a collaborative effort but as far as people who were in that store and who were 100% kind of committed, that was me. And at the same time, was insecure as an organizer [laughter], I don't know committed to
unionizing, and committed to doing the work, and also did it, sort of—not begrudgingly, but with growing awareness that this is not the kind of work I want to be doing for the rest of my life. Whereas for Lena and I think other folks like Alexa, who ended up working in union contracts, it was ‘oh, this is amazing for Babeland’ and also this is also professional, vocational like I want to do more of this, for me it was very much the opposite. [laughter] This is really not suited to my skill set.

O’Brien: Going into it, what were your associations or experiences with unions?

Wolf: My first girlfriend worked for the Hotel Trades Council and had another close friend from college that had done salting work out in the Bay Area.

O’Brien: Hotels? Hilton?

Wolf: Casinos, like restaurant worker stuff in casinos. So, my first girlfriend worked in shops that had already been unionized and kind of getting new contracts, so she wasn't doing the kind of work that—and we also weren't communicating at that time, so you know, and I then I think I had like, like my mom’s mom worked at Rubbermaid in Wooster, Ohio. I kind of grew up with stories like, ‘the union made the Rubbermaid factory close’, which—whatever, that's probably not [laughter] what happened obviously. I grew up with it not, with anything a slightly negative kind of impression, but mostly it being fairly unaware of unions and the importance of labor organizing and the history of labor organizing. Because, most of my family worked in managerial, management type level positions.

O’Brien: But your exposure to friends and partners who were in the labor movement was enough to win you over [inaudible]?

Wolf: Yeah and I think it’s also working in a cooperative business and living cooperatively and I had been involved with Resource Generation, which organizes young people with wealth and class privilege around racial and economic justice. Even though there wasn’t direct link to labor organizing, it made a lot of—I'm like, yeah of course. I guess also having, at that time, been involved with North Star Fund, which gives grants I think they've given grants to Retail Action Project maybe, but if not, certainly brand workers and other worker centers so, I didn't need convincing. And also being someone who had who came from a wealthy family and had access to other resources, I also think that, as far as—I think maybe part of why it felt so clear, so obvious was that the kind of fear of losing one's job or the fear of repercussions. That wasn't something I was wrestling with, which a lot of my coworkers had been working at Babeland for years and that was—and they were young, and they were queer, and they were trans, I mean these jobs—I feel like Babeland, I don’t know so much now, under this new ownership and post-unionizing, who they’re hiring, but at the time I feel like it was really one of the only spaces where people could work and know that they where they would be hired and know that they could some basic level of workplace acceptance, so...yeah.
O'Brien: So, tell me, in the course of trying to win people over in Brooklyn and a being part of that, what were the relationships of solidarity like? Where was the solidarity strongest and what did it develop?

Wolf: I mean I think it in, Brooklyn kind of had this—we were across the river from these other stores, and most of the people who worked in the Brooklyn store also lived in Brooklyn. There was this sense of—and I think I mentioned too, there was a lot of Rivington and SoHo based on the clientele, based on it being in places where there were a lot of bars, a lot more rowdy people, being places where there's a lot higher stakes. They always had higher selling goals than Brooklyn did too, so I think those were more intense work places to be in. And our manager was someone who was good friends with a lot of the coworkers, and she I guess she might have left—I can't remember if she left before or after the election, but I know that was one of the barriers or challenges to organizing, in Brooklyn, was that our manager was some people's really close friend so there was an allegiance towards her. And there was one of my coworkers who had been there for a really long time, who was incredibly knowledgeable, was incredibly good at what she did; I think she held a lot of power because of her seniority, but was also not explicitly anti-union but not explicitly pro-union, and that person also having a lot of strong friendships. The people who had been there for a long time, it was a lot harder to shift the store, having her....

O'Brien: So, the effective bond in the store worked against unionization.

Wolf: Yes, and I think it was myself and Arielle also did a lot of union organizing. We were also both trainers, so that, I think was also one way in which, when there was staff turnover, it was like “yes, we're gonna train them,” and that was one of the strategies and one of the tools that we used to bring people in from the very beginning.

O'Brien: How would you approach training in a way that would move people towards the possibility of the union?

Wolf: I mean it was never like, overt or spoken out there but it was making sure we establish good relationships from the get go, that they know who we are, they know that we have power and authority in the store, amongst our coworker constellation, and then asking people out for coffee shortly after they started kind of thing. And sort of starting to plant those seeds, like “how's it going, I don't know you if you heard, it's been challenging, did you hear about this really fucked up thing that happened? And we're actually trying to do this”. Kind of planting those seeds like that, and I think too, I was fired from Babeland for having mentioned the word union on the phone, I don’t know if this has come up in any of the other interviews, but I think there was a way in which –as someone who is close to Lena, who worked in Riv, and who was close to Phoenix, who worked in SoHo, and who had close relationships to my coworkers. Pro-union and anti-union folks, I just really genuinely loved everyone I worked with. So when I was fired, within the span of two days were able to organize various walk outs and work shop protests, and I think certainly being a trainer and being someone who knew a lot of people, and had been a very familiar and active face, and who also did a lot of workshops and stuff—the mini workshops, not the full length workshops. All of that certainly helped in the long run.
O’Brien: How long were you at Babeland in total before you were fired?

Wolf: I think I was just three weeks short of my one year...

O’Brien: [laughter]

Wolf: [laughter] (quietly) Yeah...

O’Brien: And were there phases during that time in how the organizing was unfolding, were there major shifts during that year?

Wolf: I mean yes—I’m trying to remember—I remember one of them was after we won the election, there were eleven different write ups that happened.

O’Brien: How far were you when the election was won?

Wolf: I started working in October, and the election was won May, May 20th I think...pretty sure. And so it was maybe the next week all the sudden there was a bunch of egregious and unprecedented write ups, and a group of us, a big group like eight or nine of us got together and even without a contract, got together with the owners Claire and Rachel, and their lawyer, and RWDSU offices, and had this incredible meeting where so many people spoke up, were able to voice what was unjust and how this was really wrong and breaking xyz law. And I think one of the thing that was really great, one thing RWDSU folks, like Steph and Pete did such a good job of actually transferring power and actually transferring knowledge of the process and knowledge of what our rights were and knowledge of how to organize and how to galvanize people, and I just think that was a real, that felt like a real moment of really exercising our collective power right after an election happened to get—I think we got a lot of those write ups, got ridden of, and this kind of show of “we can actually fucking do this!”. I feel like I don’t remember if one of the owners cried during that meeting but just feeling like such a high, like we can totally do this.

O’Brien: And for people that haven’t listened to the other Babeland interviews, Claire and Rachel are the owners, RWSDU was the union that you guys voted to join, and Steph and Pete were staff at RWSDU for organizing [inaudible].

Wolf: Yeah, yeah.

O’Brien: So, you were there for six months up until the election and six months after the election, and then were fired prior to, a few months before they won their contract.

Wolf: Yeah.

O’Brien: Wow. So, you must have ended up reluctantly playing a major role in winning over votes at the Brooklyn store, I mean, if you were one of the only yes votes when you started.
Wolf: yeah, I mean it—and I don't know, I mean so we won 21 to 4, was the final election vote.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Wolf: I'm pretty sure, I would guess if not all four of them came from Brooklyn, probably at least two or three of them came from Brooklyn. So I don't know, oh and I think there were a couple...

O'Brien: So you had a lot of unknowns in Brooklyn—

Wolf: Yeah, there were a couple people who just didn't show up to vote, too, in Brooklyn, at least one that I remember specifically. Yeah I mean I certainly tried and did the best I could, but I think Brooklyn continued to be throughout the election and kind of the moments of them getting the contract, a weaker store because there was another one of the other strong pro-union folks, a person who now works at Pleasure Chest, Matton, was fired shortly before the election. Vicki Wong was an incredible pro-union, would show up to a bunch of the contract negotiation meetings, but I think Vicki was one of the fill-ins? You know? So, was like an incredible and vocal supporter but just wasn't at the store as often, and I think too at the same time, all this stuff was happening went through a really challenging breakup, and was also going through more and more in a high end way these gender feelings of being trans and not knowing how to do that or be that, it's like, immense heartbreak and a lot of emotional struggle and at the same time, at the end of that summer, the collective I was living in, there was someone who had been abusing power in a bunch of different ways throughout the years, had been sexually harassing one of my good friends in the house, so our house process also and the safety there was also falling apart at the same time, so my involvement at Babeland, my capacity to stay present and involved was also diminished by the breakup in June and the housing stuff that happened in the end of August I think.

O'Brien: Was your starting to come identify as trans and non-binary, did that shape your experience of being a working at Babeland or your relationships in the organizing campaign or any aspect of the work there?

Wolf: I alluded to this earlier I think, there were parallel developments. My transness really emerged from me being like, oh, an understanding of being a top and exerting a particular kind of masculine energy with this trans masculine partner of mine, that very much affirmed by people like Phoenix, and very much affirmed and celebrated by other trans coworkers, one of my dear friends, a trans woman at Babeland, she was the first person that, when I was debating new names to go by, was like “Well do you want me to try some out? I'd be totally happy to test out what sounds good.” And I was like “sure, go for it!” and she was like “Let's do Kamryn” and I was like, okay, and as soon as she said it I was like, “oh my god you make everything sound so good but like, yes, and thank you” but that person, who I don't think their interview is public so I won't mention her by name, was really active in a really strong, important pro union organizer, so I think as I sought out and received more and more support for my trans identity those
people just happened to be some of the most involved in the union campaign. And I think—yeah...

O'Brien: Might not just be a coincidence...

Wolf: [laughter] It's probably not just a coincidence! But some of those things are certainly true...yeah.

O'Brien: So, right after the union vote, they wrote a lot of you up, you guys had this big collective moment of power, and then you had a—you were involved in some [inaudible] of trying to win a contract.

Wolf: Many months, so I was fired in mid-October, and then I moved upstate a few weeks after that, so I wasn't even in New York for a lot of those grueling moments of the contract negotiations.

O'Brien: Tell us about getting fired.

Wolf: [laughter] Oh, my God. This is another intersection of transness and labor for you. I was working at Babeland that day, I'm pretty sure it was a Wednesday, or a Tuesday, and had a call that some reporter wanted to talk to Claire or Rachel, the owner, I don't even know if you said Claire or Rachel by name but the owner about some story about serving senior citizens at Babeland. It was just kind of laughable because Claire and Rachel were never never at the store and didn't, they maybe did in the early years of Babeland, but were just never there. But anyways, I forget exactly what I said, but mentioned the word union and the next thing I know...

O'Brien: “You might also be interested to know we're trying to form a union here,” or...?

Wolf: Yeah, something like I think it was something like you would be interested [loud background noise] in talking to workers who are on the floor with clients, with customers, we would have a lot to say about how Babeland supports elders in their sexual lives. Yeah, probably like sort of smackily or sneakily was like by the way we recently unionized, and the workers are maybe people who you want to talk to [laughs] for this story. [loud footsteps] And then left work, I think I got a text or a call from Steph about the reporter who had then contacted the RWDSU about doing a story about the union, which I had not told him what to do! In my memory of the conversation with him it was a thing I mentioned in passing and had taken down his number and had passed it along to whoever the media policy is. And I think meanwhile too, that's what the culture of Babeland's management is they would just send, even though they weren't supposed to be changing their rules under status quo, which is kind of a freeze in policy changes from the moment that the election happens and is ratified through contract negotiation, but they were realizing a lot of their policies were illegal or were unclear so they were putting out these quote unquote new policies that weren't really new or weren't supposed to be new but were like clarifications of what had already existed, I don't know, it was a hot mess. I got a text from Steph being like “oh, weird, this person called, cool, really excited, do you want to talk to him?” and I said I actually can't, I'm on my way to see Happy Birthday
Marsha, [loud footsteps] this documentary Marsha, who's a black trans woman activist, formerly incarcerated person, with two trans coworkers of mine, it was at the, the screening was at the new school, and there was this incredible panel of other trans activists with the, maybe both of the creators on it. Tourmaline was there, was one of the creators. I was sitting next to or between these, even, two trans coworkers of mine during the Q&A and I got this email from Claire being like, “you broke our media policy, and you are...” I forget, I could probably look up the email, it’s in the records somewhere, but it was very clearly like, to the effect of “you’re trying to throw us under, this is unprecedented pro union. Blah blah and you broke these...and you’re fired, effective now.” And I think I had gotten this voicemail earlier in the day from her and I texted Steph “hey I just got this email from Claire or this voicemail from Claire saying to call her back.” [loud knocking sound] Which was not precedent, they never got involved in day to day functioning in the business, and the fact that it didn't come from my manager, it was just—and Steph was like, “I wouldn’t worry about it, call her back when you can.” I sent her an email and asked her what’s up. So, Steph was like, I’m in the middle of this event celebrating the resistance and life of trans women of color, to just get fired in the middle of it, it was really intense. And Steph was totally surprised; everyone did not see that coming. I had already put in my notice that I would be leaving because I was moving upstate, so I think I had only three weeks left anyways on the job, had already put my notice in. I was one of the top selling, always above the store median, was a trainer. I mean, I was incredibly—I don’t know—otherwise was an exemplary employee, despite trying to collectivize the workplace. [laughter] That happened, and then in the span of the next day, and I can’t remember if it was one full day of making a lot of calls, and sending a lot of text messages and emails, trying to spread the word about what happened and then workers at the Rivington store organized a walk there. There had already been meetings that had also been planned for later that week, and so yeah, workers at Rivington and SoHo kind of planned protests during their staff meetings kind of in support of the union, but also demanding for me to get my job back. Brooklyn did not do an action...

O'Brien: That’s cold.

Wolf: It was....it was complicated. I think we did a bunch of, a handful of different flyer-ing and canvassing right after, also about my termination and raising awareness about the campaign and the fact that it was clearly an illegal firing, and that it was just part and parcel of the ways in which management was trying to fuck over their workers. And I think in some ways the fact that I got fired, and I did again because of my, because I wasn't in a position of financial instability. That would have been for a working class, or a poor coworker of mine, that would have been, being out 900 dollars or three weeks of no employment. So, the fact that it didn’t threaten my ability to eat or pay for housing, [loud footsteps] the fact that I had really good relationships at most of the stores, and the fact that there had been sort of a lull in workforce labor organizing and a lull in momentum in getting our contract signed. All of these things kind of, and the fact that I had already planned on leaving Babeland was this kind of like a really, like I wouldn’t have wished for anyone to be fired, but in some ways it was a really awesome moment of remembering the power of collective agency and collective organizing. So, I don't know, I don't know if that’s fucked up, but that’s kind of how it panned out and how I see it.
O'Brien: Makes sense to me. [laughter] Is there more you'd like to say about the Babeland campaign? I want to ask you more about what you've been doing since spirituality and...

Wolf: [clapping sound] Is there more that I want to say about the Babeland campaign...? I think the experience has already come up, but just the experience of not just political solidarity of we're all trying to get better wages, better job security, benefits, yes we're trying to do all these structural things, and also solidarity in the sense of the experience of being marginalized in all sorts of different ways, as trans folks, as women, as people of color, as poor working class folks, the ways in which the experience of that marginalization was in some ways much, was very heightened by the union campaign because of the ways in which management was so clear on wanting to, clear on the ways in which we were insignificant to them, clear in the ways in which our ability to sustain and live lives of respect and financial solvency was just so unimportant to them, that coupled with then, in the face of that, really coming together in our marginality, to experience ourselves as powerful, to experience ourselves as capable of impacting structural change, but also this kind of like healing work, which was so much of what we were doing anyways with customers, right? Trying to plant these seeds of different ways of understanding bodies and what they can do and how they can love each other and how they can support each other. That all felt really strongly by me, in the ways in which my coworkers really rallied against me—no, not against me [laughter], for me, in that moment of being fired, but also throughout. It felt, and continues to be, an incredible experience of both really rad, queer, and trans folks who are sex positive and pro-union pro labor, it's just an incredible confluence of people. So, I don't know. And yeah, just that...

O'Brien: So, where did you move upstate?

Wolf: I moved to Troy, which is a town kind of 15 minutes away from Albany, in the capital region. I moved there because a former housemate of mine, one of my dear friends, asked me to be present for the birth of her child which was an incredible honor to be part of that, but I moved in November of 2016, Sylvie was born in April the following year. And I ended up working, getting a job in the capital, in the pride center of the capital region, being their program coordinator. So, doing some public panel stuff, of like gender 101, trans 101, sex ED 101. I taught on Valentine's day, a sex ED workshop for PE teachers [laughter] which was so funny, but a lot of, also, volunteer training and facilitating of different teen groups for LGBT youth, but also our adult trans groups. Organized A-Prom, which is what they call alternative prom, which is 300-400 hundred youth from around the capital region, this big event. Did a lot of fun stuff... There's a lot—I don't know if you were—the executive director, Martha Harvey, is an incredible TERF so there's a lot of transphobia in that institution or workplace and another...

O'Brien: Oh, that's horrible!

Wolf: [laughter] It's really bad. There's a lot of stuff—

O'Brien: Are you still working there?

Wolf: No. Oh, God no.
O'Brien: How long were you there?

Wolf: I was only there for, seven months maybe? Because I moved, I started, [loud footsteps] I moved back to New York City to do my, get my Master of Divinity at Union Theological Seminary. That's a whole, there's a whole other story of incredible trans activism and organizing and the termination of my [loud footsteps] dear friend Jenna [inaudible], I'm sure they wouldn't mind, they would not mind being here. They were another trans-feminine person that was fired illegally for—I don't even remember what the actual [loud footsteps] incident was. It was something about a Facebook page, and TERFs, and this kind of clash of older, primarily white, lesbians and conservative folks in the community upstate, clashing with one of the most, if not the most, active adult group that we had was like the trans, the TGNC community, who was always really well attended. I mean, folks with a lot of different needs and really saw the trans pride support group was one of the only places they could go. A lot of, I would say probably mostly trans women and trans feminine folks, whose one of their only safe spaces was the pride center. So when this kind of like Facebook thing happened, and Martha basically...I think, was in support of these old, former board members or current board members who were just spewing this TERF, trans exclusionary radical feminist, this transphobic rhetoric, and just letting it exist up there. And now I'm remembering, I think Jonah, as one of the employees, I wasn't work there at the time and I had transitioned out of staff, ended up deleting the posts. And kind of like closing the Facebook page for comments, because it had gotten so violent and so volatile, and there were threats against local trans women that were happening on that page, and Jonah then got in trouble by Martha for having removed, for exerting agency that they didn't have, to take down that post. Which, kind of snowballed into a bunch of other stuff...yeah [laughter] that all happened. There was stuff at Times Union, Times Union was one of the Albany papers. It was definitely written up about it. So, anyways, that was one chapter that you should definitely, if you're able to. I guess it's not New York City. But then I moved back here, to start this graduate program.

O'Brien: And it's a Master of Divinity?

Wolf: M-hmm. It's a three-year program. Most people who are at the school are—it's a professional track thing for folks who are trying to become ordained priests, pastors and reverends. I—my dad's side is Jewish, and my mom's side is Greek Orthodox, like I was baptized but did not—do not identify as being religiously affiliated, it certainly wasn't a big part of my upbringing. But I'm there kind of with an interest in spiritual care work and chaplaincy work. I thought about going to social work school for a number of years, but from so many people who I knew who had gone in the schooling itself, told me that the schooling itself was really technical, and some people ended up at jobs they really loved, and others did not really click. So, I ended up at Union, kind of thinking about and wanting to do spiritual care work and chaplaincy, or what is understood as chaplaincy, for trans and gender non-conforming people. Kind of asking questions like, “what does that look like?” and “what are the ways in which spiritual lives have been seen as incompatible with the queer identity or trans identity in part because of the religious trauma that so many people in the queer and trans community face?” , and in part because of my, I never thought I was “good enough” to be spiritual because of all
this shame around my otherness and my difference and my gender non-conformity in queerness, right? So, what does it mean to like, to plant seeds of, that's actually a part of, [loud banging] we all have physical health, and emotional health, but we also all have spiritual health or spiritual components of our being, that can manifest in a lot of different ways but, more specifically within a health care setting. You know, like right now chaplains will see patients if they're inpatient in end of life settings. There's also chaplains in like, prison and military and some school contexts, but what would it look like for chaplains to support trans folks at different stages of their interaction with the health care systems? So, as they're considering going on hormones, or they're waiting for their surgery to happen, couldn't these moments of profound transition, which is what spiritual life is about, right? There's ritual for birth, and for death, and for bar/bat mitzvahs of becoming a man, becoming a woman, getting married, right? It's these moments of transitioning from one state to another, which is so much—what transitioning is, whether it's medical or social, legal. But, especially I think, as a non-binary person, I was interested in what it means to be permanently in a state of kind of [inaudible] in between and how that affects one's, [loud footsteps] or interacts with one's spirituality and spiritual sense of self. So...that's what I'm up to now.

**O'Brien:** That's wonderful.

**Wolf:** Yeah. I'm...I think it's really important. It doesn't really exist yet [laughter] in the world. I mean, Mount Sinai, the center for transgender medicine and surgery opened two years ago and they've had chaplaincy services there, for maybe for most of that time. But right now, they're in a moment of trying to expand their spiritual care services for trans folks beyond who is there for inpatient surgeries and overnight surgeries too. But I think most of the chaplains on staff, if not all the chaplains on staff are cis gendered. So, I think, certainly part of with Babeland organizing, there's a peer to peer element of I think, the most profound forms of healing, right? So, to be a trans chaplain. I think of it as, like, I want to call myself a gendered doula, it doesn't have this religious or Christian kind of like undertone. Chaplain, I think a lot of people a lot of time will ask me ‘do you wear a collar?’ and I'm like, “No, I don't wear a clerical collar.” It's really cute, I think about Halloween costumes and being a kinky priest, but, no, it's really about being present for people and being [loud knocking] able to hold space. And not just in a universally comforting or supportive way, sometimes it's like holding space for people to feel their pain. I was, I worked this past summer at Albany Medical Center as a chaplain, and it's incredible and powerful work. I want it to be accessible to people, not just religiously affiliated people or just Christians, not just folks who are dying or facing chronic illness, but everyone. I think that is important also for our political movements, also for this kind of, how are we caring for ourselves and each other, what does it mean to be in a body in capitalism, under this white supremacist, transphobic administration. How are we actually showing up in our day to day lives? And that feels, yeah, that feels very much like life's work.

**O'Brien:** Yeah. Is there anything else you would like to say that I haven't included in this interview?

**Wolf:** I feel like we covered a lot. That was a lot of stuff. No. Just thanks, thanks for doing this work.
O'Brien: Thank you for giving your time and story.

Wolf: Yeah, absolutely.

O'Brien: [static] In, just checking in after the interview there, you began to share, I pointed out some of the common threads between, around spiritual health and care, but also the contradictions and dynamics between trans people and cis people and queer communities and you began to share something else about your work in seminary?

Wolf: Yeah, so there, I think there are like six or seven trans or GNC intersex identified folks at Union, which maybe has 250 people there altogether. And most of those folks came in, in my year, so we're a very small group of people and union is kind of known as being, a progressive Christian institution. The late Dr. James Cohn, who passed in May, was one of the founders of black liberation theology. He was a professor for many decades. Dolores Williams, who's one of the early Womanist theologians, also taught at Union, so it has this rich history of racial justice work and Christian ethics. But my experience as a trans person, we're not in the curriculum. There's two queer staff people, one's the dean and one's, he's not a classroom professor and so there's not queer faculty really. So, there's this profound experience of just like, isolation and a lot of people doing, being like “Oh, you're trans, cool, that's cool, oh you're doing trans stuff that's great, keep doing it” but without a lot of critical engagement with my ideas, kind of this experience of just, people kind of like deferring to my expertise? Which is fine, but it's not a place where I feel like I'm growing, and most queers and many of trans folks are invested in their religious communities and kind of making those spaces queer affirming and queer friendly, and inclusive which is an awesome project and I wish them all well but it's not necessarily folks who are asking structural questions. [phone vibrates] About them adding new ways of organizing, like what are new institutions or new alternatives to what currently exist. Yeah, so it's an experience of a lot of social and academic and spiritual loneliness. I often wonder like, will I ever have a space like Babeland again. [laughter] Where this just rich confluence of trans people and queer people who are committed to each other in these explicitly interdependent ways, like you can't have a union if you're not committed, like really committed on a foundational level to your coworkers and I think probably the same thing is true for a lot of religious communities, or like the idea right? That ritual practices heighten our sensual knowing of the fundamental, interdependence of our lives, right? And not, my hopes of it just not in like a kind of spiritual esoteric sort of way, like we are all one sort of way, you know that's important but also the structural question of what are our economics? How are we sharing resources? How are we redistributing resources? How are we materially...? And this also comes from living collectively for the past three years and that space being really incredible, like sharing meals and sharing resources, but also in some moments also failed to do some of that economic--that work around economics that support and take into account identity in addition to and how that identity shapes and influences one's ability to make money and literally survive. I just feel like I'm constantly searching for a community and more community of people who want opportunities to deeply invest in trans folks and what that—I don't know exactly, I'm not sure what that looks like the intersection of transness and spiritual care work and collective organizing, collective living but there's this sense of wanting to find
that. But then also being a graduate student and being overwhelmed by papers and work and things like that, but—that's what I was going to add I guess... [laughter]

O'Brien: Makes a lot of sense.

Wolf: Yeah. Okay, you can turn the—[laughter]