

**ENBY SPOKEN HISTORIES:
A COLLECTION OF TRANSCRIPTS**

by

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“I am still fucking here.”

Miss Major

FOREWORD

Content Warning: transphobia, addiction, suicidal ideation

I didn't think I'd make it to twenty-six. But to my surprise, I *am* here, writing this story with sweaty palms and a shaky pen. Although this story has a happy ending (spoiled in the first sentence), the journey to get here was traumatic and may be triggering to some readers. Please skip ahead if necessary. If you *do* choose to read this, remember to listen to your body and take breaks as needed.

This is a story of resilience and finding self-acceptance through community.

I realized I was trans non-binary in 2016, towards the end of my undergraduate degree. I was living in Chicago at the time. I knew non-binary people existed, but none of my friends identified as such and I had no idea how to even begin connecting with other trans people. I was alone. I thought I was a freak for wanting a vagina, body hair everywhere, and a flat chest. I wanted to wear lacy dresses with my chest hair peeking out. I wanted a low voice and a high ponytail. I felt both masculine and feminine energy, sometimes neither. It was confusing, to say the least. I would try to find representations of anyone that looked like me or felt like I did, but continuously hit walls, making me feel even more alien. It seemed the only representation I could find was of conventionally attractive, white, binary trans people. I didn't feel like a man or a woman. I didn't see myself anywhere. I was alone.

I isolated myself. I thought I was disgusting, a freak. My feelings were reinforced by people I used to consider friends, they were reinforced by the media, my partner at the time, politics, the list goes on. I had so much internalized shame that I was waking up every morning at four with excruciating pain. I would throw up and then take baths to self-soothe. Nothing worked, so I started turning to pills to numb the shame I had around being nonbinary. I quickly became dependent on painkillers and watched my life slowly fall apart. I was hospitalized and then later dropped out of graduate school. I felt inadequate and useless.

I met Coyote in Fall of 2018. He was one of my first trans friends and I will never forget taking the train to his Brooklyn apartment and watching videos of cute animals doing silly things for hours. If I had to pinpoint the moment that made me realize I wanted to live, it was that night. Coyote made me feel seen. He was all the things I wanted to be. He was proud of being trans. He was a little twink with the cutest laugh and amazing tattoos. Although he's five years younger than me, I looked at him as my trans elder, and in many ways, I still do. He taught me that I could take up space being who I really was. He taught me that I didn't have to be ashamed of my identity or how I wanted to express myself. My wise sibling made me want to live. He gave me reasons to try.

Although I still struggle with shame, I am working hard to heal. Being around community has helped me immensely. I finally met people like me who made me feel worthy. Now, I wouldn't trade being trans for *anything* in the world.

THE MAKING OF ENBY SPOKEN HISTORIES

Enby¹ Spoken Histories is a multimedia storytelling project, preserving and uplifting transgender and non-binary history through recorded conversations with living, contemporary trans people. Co-founded by Ángel Labarthe del Solar and Coyote Park, this project was born out of emotional and existential need—a need to feel heard and a need to see ourselves reflected and represented in society; in the media, literature, academia, archives, and otherwise.

Enby Spoken Histories currently houses over one hundred recordings publicly online. Due to the fact that most LGBTQ+ archives are underfunded, including ours, we decided to preserve copies of our recorded conversations at the National Library of Congress. Being a renowned, federal institution, we can not only trust that the audio will be well-maintained, but also that researchers, academics, policy-makers, and people in power will have a greater chance of coming across our work and potentially use it as a catalyst for social change². Making our community's³ voices present in such a cis⁴, heteronormative, white space has been a challenging, but very intentional action.

Enby Spoken Histories not only hopes to strengthen communities from within, but also to create spaces within broader society that feel safer for transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC⁵) individuals to exist and thrive in. Offering space for real conversations can be

¹ [EN'bee] from 'NB' stands for non-binary. The term non-binary is an evolving term being used by people whose gender identities are not represented by the traditional gender binaries. 'Enby' was created so as not to use NB (non-Black), which was coined by Black activists online and should not be co-opted by white people (Smith 2017).

² Our recordings have been found by medical professionals and professors, resulting in opportunities for lectures at Columbia and Yale. Additionally, our recorded stories are now in a number of syllabi across the country, being used as an educational tool for students.

³ The word 'community' comes up a lot in this text. In this case, we are referring to the trans, non-binary, 2Spirit, intersex, and gender nonconforming community. The word is easy to say, but what does it really mean? Everyone's understandings are different, but to us, community means we share a sense of identity, customs, norms, values, etc. Trans community unites through common struggle and shared language.

⁴ Cis, short for cis-gender, refers to people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth (LGBTQ2S Terms and Definitions).

⁵ Terms such as 'non-binary' are under the umbrella of transgender identities. However, not all transgender people identify as non-binary or gender non-conforming. Throughout this introduction, the terms are used interchangeably, mirroring the fluidity in which the community uses the terms.

lifesaving— stories that incorporate joy and resilience, questioning and discovery. It can also be lifesaving for trans listeners seeking human resonance. Enby Spoken Histories is both a resource and an action of creating space.

Since the beginning, we have been dedicated to hosting events, such as listening parties, panel discussions, celebrations, musical and artistic performances, mourning spaces, and more. We use our Instagram as a way to uplift storytellers and connect them with other community members. When Covid-19 hit, it became even more important to us to bring our trans family together, so we began hosting virtual events (e.g.: monthly book clubs, shows, workshops, drag performances, meditation circles, etc.) so that people from all over the world with access to the Internet could join. When we have outside performers or speakers, we pay them for their labor and encourage audience members to tip. Although it is not mandatory, it has been beautiful to watch trans people care for one another. With upwards of three-hundred people joining the video calls, our participating guests often get to take home profits that they vocalize are helping them tremendously during this time.

Our social media following has grown immensely during the pandemic, presumably in part because most trans folks do not have immediate support from their usual networks right now. Enby Spoken Histories is currently collecting quarantine recordings about trans peoples' experiences navigating a worldwide pandemic. We are excited to host a virtual listening party in January 2020 where we will play audio clips and make space for people to talk with one another, reflect, grieve, and laugh together. Trans folks often reach out to us to thank us for the work we are doing, as it is changing their lives and making them feel less alone.

LACUNAS IN THE ARCHIVE & THE COMPLEXITY OF VISIBILITY

At Enby Spoken Histories, we record conversations between trans people and their loved ones, then we preserve them in our own public, participatory archive⁶, as well as in the National Library of Congress. Although transgender and non-binary people have been around throughout time, most of us do not know our origin stories, or stories of the generation of activists that paved way for us, because of their stories being erased. “I think about not just people being pushed out of the movement, but how did HIV and AIDS — like criminalization, not just the epidemic — play into the erasure of us ever knowing of so many people who came before us?” (Tourmaline 2019). Trans people, especially those who identify as gender nonconforming, nonbinary, 2Spirit, and intersex have long been left out of the archives. Inspired by activists like Tourmaline and Miss Major, we aim to fill gaps in the archive in efforts to make our identities less obscure and create a less historically isolated story of how we came to be — both for ourselves and future generations. We want to bring trans history to trans people directly, but also provide a window for cis people into trans lived experiences without turning trans people into spectacles⁷.

Miss Major’s infamous mantra, “I am still fucking here”, sums up the way we, as a community, feel. The media frames trans people as modern, only now presenting themselves as a result of our new post-gay marriage world (Page 135). In Fall of 2018, Enby Spoken Histories decided to infiltrate the National Library of Congress as a radical protest to prevent our continuous erasure and attempt to change the false narrative that we are a new phenomenon. Those who are a part of Enby Spoken Histories are a part of a movement—a storytelling movement—that is essential for both starting and continuing conversations for social change. Infiltrating the most renowned,

⁶ Available on Soundcloud to the general public who can listen to these stories for free.

⁷ This is a challenge that is almost impossible to remedy. Trans people, especially trans women of color, are demanded by society to make a spectacle of their bodies. A sense of intimacy is then cultivated by viewers behind a veil of spectacle (George 2014)

federal archive has been a part of the movement to make sure our voices are heard by people in power. Most importantly, we amplify the voices of the people that participate in this storytelling movement. With the participation of our community, we can interrupt constraining narratives of what we can become, and who will remember us.

Enby Spoken Histories is a community. It is a participatory archive. A call to action.

And now, a book.

Curating a book version of Enby Spoken Histories is another way to cultivate a vibrant, equitable, revolutionary, and timely collection of stories of trans, 2Spirit⁸, non-binary, gender non-conforming⁹, and intersex¹⁰ people. We want our stories to be disseminated in as many ways possible and accessible to as many people as possible. Enby Spoken Histories is not interested in the creation of products, or the perpetuation of capitalism. Rather, we view our work as ongoing— with many lives and no end in sight. We are attempting to blur boundaries and circulate this project as a space. Our conversational method is unusual to oral history, as we subvert the interviewer / interviewee binary mindset. Part of the inherent power of TGNC folks is working against a colonial system of gender¹¹. Enby Spoken Histories centers community based action through projects and events rather than simply creating academic products. It is about returning and recirculating the work back into the community and blurring the boundaries of colonial methodologies (Srigley and Zembrzycki 2018).

⁸ 2Spirit “is a cultural identity used by some Indigenous people who have both masculine and feminine spirits” (LGBTQ2S Terms and Definitions).

⁹ Gender non-conforming “is “an umbrella term used proudly by some people to defy gender restrictions and/or to deconstruct gender norms” (LGBTQ2S Terms and Definitions).

¹⁰ Intersex “is an umbrella term used to describe a person whose physical sex characteristics or chromosomes don’t fit traditional medical definitions of male or female” (LGBTQ2S Terms and Definitions).

¹¹ Western society has long imposed its binary belief systems onto Indigenous communities. Many North American Native tribes celebrated alternative genders before conquest and forced assimilation (Picq and Tikuna 2019). The term non-binary, for example, is a 21st-century concept of genders outside the binary; these identities have existed for thousands of years, long before entering academic or queer spaces.

Existing documentation of trans experiences from a cis-gaze do not portray us in a way that shows our multidimensionality. Furthermore, they tend to focus on dominant narratives or themes (e.g.: coming out, transitioning, etc.) that exclude a wider range of our lived experiences. Enby Spoken Histories as a physical space is one that encourages conversations around anything the individual wants to talk about, or is passionate about. We stray away from rigid models that have been used to learn about our community, knowing that they lack a dynamic understanding of who we really are. Enby Spoken Histories does not attempt to seek out specific stories. Nor do we hold expectations for transgender performance that reinforces harmful cis- and hetero-normative perspectives. It is also extremely important for us to uplift the voices of those who are most vulnerable and marginalized, when they *want* to have their voices heard, that is. We acknowledge that not everyone is safe being visible; as seductive as visibility is, it continuously puts trans people in danger, especially trans women of color (Burton, Gossett¹², and Stanley 193).

The past five years have been a whirlwind for the trans community; for the first time in our lives, we are seeing a rapid increase in representation and political victories for our community: recognizable celebrities like Caitlyn Jenner, Sam Smith, and Elliot Page came out publicly, Laverne Cox was named one of the world's most beautiful women by *People Magazine*, Obama hired the first openly transgender White House staff member, a number of shows with trans leads have come out, and nondiscrimination protection bills have been passed in several states. At the same time, however, the past five years have had a record number of anti-trans bills introduced and implemented at the local, state, and federal levels. Violence against trans women of color has

¹² Now known as and referred to as Tourmaline.

heightened drastically since the so-called ‘transgender tipping point’¹³ (Vaid-Menon 2015). It is clear that visibility is not the answer, but it can be *part* of the answer.

Admittedly, it has been difficult for us, as the founders of Enby Spoken Histories, to aim towards more non-binary and TGNC visibility. We have asked ourselves many times if transformational and liberatory possibilities could arise from sharing our stories when narrators have complete agency in the ways they want to be represented. The truth is, we do not have an answer. With that being said, it is important to note the stakes around visibility and why we feel it is important for us to fight towards it. We have witnessed accounts from our narrators, as well as our own lived experiences, leading us to believe the work we are engaging in is not only ethical, but necessary. Visibility has the power to remedy acute social crises (Burton, Gossett, and Stanley 180). We have also seen firsthand that sharing our stories can be lifesaving for other trans people who are feeling alone, or not seen. So few people recognize and accept our identities, and we believe that learning from each other is critical to bring visibility and acceptance to the trans community. It is also important to note that, being relational beings, without outlets where we can see ourselves reflected as trans people, it makes it nearly impossible to learn language to talk about our identities; community helps us grow and shift with greater understandings of the self. Enby Spoken Histories is not looking for representation within existing, mainstream structures, we are looking to challenge the bounds of existing structures and institutions *within* the context of complex visibility.

Since the exponential increase in binary trans visibility in 2014, or the ‘transgender tipping point’, “representation of trans people in the media continues to be of people who are binary,

¹³ The ‘transgender tipping point’ is driven “by Blackness and Black femme embodiment... they are the representational figures of transgender issues and politics and the martyrs of political struggles for civil rights for trans people” (Ellison 2). The concept gained popularity in 2014 as a result of a promise of a cultural revolution when Laverne Cox was on the front cover of Time Magazine.

white, and conventionally attractive” (Vaid-Menon 2015). In other words, society will consider accepting you *if* you conform to cis-hetero norms. The age of trans visibility only seems to recognize trans people that are palatable to the greater public; it only recognizes those who pass¹⁴ as cis. “Many view passing as utilitarian in function, namely to ensure the survival of the one who passes. This perspective further, and necessarily, implies that passing occurs only when someone from a marginal or oppressed social group crosses over into the dominant or privileged group” (Billard 464). As we try to make sense of the paradoxes of visibility and violence, we acknowledge the importance of creating visibility around gender nonconforming individuals or people that challenge binary norms. These are the stories that do not get media attention. These are the people who are most at risk at the hands of both civilians and law enforcement when expressing their gender identities authentically and externally; this disproportionately affects trans people of color.

The book *Trap Door* brings clarity around the stakes of visibility, challenging readers to reflect deeply on the ripple effects of the transgender tipping point and the problems with representation when it is not directly *for* trans people. Treva Ellison writes that, “The transgender tipping point narrative suggests that public interest in transgender representation, and transgender power is progressive and has reached an apotheosis in our current time. Even critical counter-narratives of the tipping point stage their arguments by remarking that despite advances in visibility and representation, violence against trans people has reached a climax today” (Ellison 12). This paradox around representation and escalating violence has sparked myriad debates among trans

¹⁴ Passing (as cis-gender male or female). This is a term used in the trans community to describe “transgender people who show no clear signs of the gender they were assigned at birth pass (as cisgender), while those who do show signs fail to pass” (Billard 464)

theorists. “Visibility,” write Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton, “functions like a trap door¹⁵” (Cram 73). Trap doors are offered to those who cooperate with dominant norms. These doors, however, *do* have the possibility of making new futures possible. Grappling with this paradox and the complexities of visibility can be crippling, so we ground ourselves in remembering that individuals often reach out to us to thank us for making them feel seen, or even for saving their lives just by existing. It is possible the sociocultural backlash against our community could be, with time, could be alleviated in our attempts to change public attitudes through storytelling.

ENBY SPOKEN HISTORIES IS A MOVEMENT

Enby Spoken Histories is a call to action to facilitate an open network of resonance, a caring and loving space where people see each other and see themselves reflected back. We hope to continue growing our archive of stories, photography, writing, and other forms of expression that serve as resources for community dialogue and public policy, as we imagine and enact brighter futures for the trans community. We hope this book will help normalize our existences while we are still alive. As trans people, we should not have to *humanize* our existences to greater society. Doing so would mean that performance would be required of us to be recognized as human. The goal is not to be more acceptable to society. When I say humanize, I mean challenging narrow representations of trans and nonbinary people; I mean rejecting performances required¹⁶ of us to be seen as acceptable.

¹⁵ “Trans people are offered many “doors”— entrances to visibility, to resources, recognition, and to understanding... these doors are almost always also “traps” — accommodating trans bodies, histories, and culture only insofar as they can be forced to hew to hegemonic modalities” (Burton, Gossett, and Stanley XXIII)

¹⁶ For example, white, conventionally attractive, etc. Trans people are seen as more acceptable when they conform to the gender binary (Vaid Menon 2015).

While the stories collected for this book cannot claim to represent all trans people, we still hope they will enhance our collective knowledge, build visibility (discussed below), and remind people that they are not alone.

Our dream is to see trans people flourish.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, Enby Spoken Histories had to cancel twenty-four conversations scheduled for March of 2020. We waited impatiently to be reunited with our community until it dawned on us that we would be in this for a very long time. We began collecting “quarantine recordings” in efforts to find creative ways to validate each other¹⁷ despite not being able to gather in person. People that follow our community pages on social media have been sending in voice memos recorded on their phones, usually from their bedrooms. These are not dialogues or conversations, but personal reflections that last no longer than three minutes.

People tend to contextualize their recordings around Covid-19, but we do not ask people to make it about their experiences getting through the pandemic. Like our other recorded conversations, these are unstructured; we do not give prompts unless people ask. If we are asked for ideas, we have a list of prompts including questions like, *How have you been practicing self-care during quarantine? If you are an essential worker, what has your experience been like? What things have you been struggling with the most since the lockdown began?* Our list of questions is optional and people generally like to come up with their own topics. We have had voice memos

¹⁷ The aim of validating each other is to witness each other while being forced to be apart, as well as to simply affirm people through these difficult times.

where people sing songs they wrote in quarantine, some read passages from books— the possibilities are endless and folks get creative.

Our quarantine project is ongoing and has been very fruitful. With over fifty quarantine recordings in our participatory archive¹⁸, we have realized that trans people seem to find solace in hearing about other trans people’s experiences navigating the pandemic. The work Enby Spoken Histories is doing, particularly in regards to community organizing (described below), is more important than ever right now, as Covid-19 worsens *every* form of inequality.

The problems vulnerable populations were facing prior to the pandemic are being reinforced and exacerbated right now because the virus. Trans folks are losing their jobs, facing housing instability, food insecurity, and family rejection, often being forced to live with family members that do not accept them. Additionally, they face, now more than ever, unique barriers to medical and legal interventions (e.g.: difficulty accessing necessary gender-affirming medical care and suffering from increased dysphoria¹⁹ by having to depend on the legal system²⁰). This pandemic continuously illuminates deep inequities in access to health, further exacerbated for trans and nonbinary people, who already experience more economic instability than their cis counterparts (Wald and Woulfe 2020). This is all happening within the context of a political climate in which anti-trans bills and policy changes are being proposed and implemented across state and federal legislatures²¹, which has a tremendous effect on our community’s mental health. Trans Lifeline, a trans-led peer support organization and crisis hotline for trans people, conducted a study from

¹⁸ Quarantine recordings are on our Soundcloud for free, so people can listen to each other’s recordings.

¹⁹ Gender dysphoria “is the feeling of discomfort or distress that might occur in people whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth or sex-related physical characteristics” (Mayo Clinic).

²⁰ Many trans folks are dependent on courts, many of which have closed during Covid, to change their names and/or gender markers.

²¹ The ACLU tracks anti-trans bills. Readers can find a list of these bills on ACLU’s website, which is listed in this text under ‘References’

March to August 2020 that revealed that crisis calls touched on suicidal ideation 59% of the time and one in four crisis calls discussed lack of trans community. This implication is much more acute than what the crisis line was experiencing pre-March 2020, as calls to Trans Lifeline have risen by 40% and continue to climb (Fowers and Wan 2020). As the founders of Enby Spoken Histories, we know we have the power to bring community together and with that power comes responsibility.

As we wade our way through the uncertainty of the pandemic, it is our goal to continue building community through virtual events and attempt to find ways to meet our community's needs. Given the increasing rates of suicidal ideation and collective feelings of loss of community due to social isolation, it is vital that Enby Spoken Histories makes space for folks to vent, mourn, heal, *and* play. Peer and community support “are essential to one’s sense of wellness and especially critical to TGNB²² people as they work to navigate identity development, stigma, and discrimination” (Wald and Woulf 2020). Community, at the end of the day, is what helps us move through the unrest. Our collection of quarantine recordings show people that there is still beauty in the world. Through feeling connected by these recordings, people can see that there is, in fact, still joy. There are reasons to keep going, *to keep fighting*.

Throughout quarantine, we have done monthly book clubs and hosted multiple shows with trans performers. We may not be able to record dialogues/interviews in person, but we plan on growing our collection of quarantine recordings while making space for trans people to connect after being separated from their usual support systems.

²² TGNB stands for trans / gender non-binary.

OUR PROCESS & DECOLONIZING ORAL HISTORY METHODS

“It is about returning and recirculating the work back into the community and blurring the boundaries of colonial methodologies” (Strigley and Zembrzycki 2018).

Our methodologies are grounded in using decolonial²³ methods to build a new approach to oral history. Unlike the discipline’s traditional practices involving an interviewer and interviewee, we instead invite participants to have a dialogue with a partner of their choice with whom they already have an existing relationship. Both people involved can share their experiences, but in some cases one person takes on a more traditional “interviewer” role while the other takes on the role of a storyteller. The recorded dialogues are unstructured and we insist it is important to let the conversation flow organically based on whatever existing dynamic the two individuals have. In our initial phone call with the storytellers, we explain the project and ask them to pick a conversation partner that would be well suited for whatever conversation they wish to have.

If one of our narrators picks a cis person to have a conversation with them, we ask that that person be mindful of how much space they are taking up. We explain that this is a space for trans people to talk about their experiences and we trust that whoever that person has chosen is someone that will help them get what they want out of the conversation. Although we ask cis people to be mindful of how much space they take up, ultimately that is something that unfolds during the recording based on the dynamic and/or existing relationship or conversation topics. Both people can ask questions and both people can answer questions/tell stories regardless of identity, but it’s up to the two people in front of the microphone to decide how they want it to be.

²³ Our decolonial methods include, but are not limited to, being in community with people (Tallbear 5), avoiding extractive research methods, making our archive participatory, undoing the binary of researcher-subject, taking up a role of facilitator instead of interviewer, etc. Our most distinct interventions are letting narrators decide who *they* want to be in dialogue with and maintaining relationships with the people we work with.

While this is primarily a trans and non-binary space, the stories are also ones that have unruly effects on cis/straight people and dominant identity structures *beyond* the recorded conversations.

In the recording space, we always have an Enby Spoken Histories facilitator (Coyote Park and/or Ángel Labarthe del Solar) alongside the storytellers. By encouraging people to choose who they want to be in a conversation space with and what they want to talk about with their conversation partner, we are subverting the traditional structures of oral history. “Decolonizing research promotes the inclusion of traditional knowledge systems and acceptance of Native ways of creating and sharing knowledge. It is multiepistemic, boundary pushing, and evolutionary. It counters hegemonic research methodologies and methods to benefit Native communities and Peoples. It is research that connects to all living things and honors the relationships we have with everything that surrounds us” (Del Duca, Sage, Sato, and Venable 342). We acknowledge that power dynamics still exist with this format, but have found that doing recordings from a facilitator role makes the exchange more balanced than a traditional interviewer-interviewee or researcher-subject dynamic. We also believe that by inviting storytellers to choose what they want to talk about instead of imposing a metanarrative, we are radically changing the ways that oral history can be practiced.

Our goal is not to decolonize the field of oral history, but to challenge dominant institutions using decolonizing methods to build something new. Day-to-day conversations are often not recorded or given a place in written testimony. Providing space for radical, decolonial thinking and practice pushes against existing Western systems of knowledge that rely on and perpetuate classist, ableist, and racist structures” (Allen and McDonald 183). By decolonizing systems of

knowledge²⁴, we recenter the importance of the ways that many marginalized communities have preserved their histories, and inherited understandings of each other and those that came before them. Oral histories are essential to keeping the soul and heart of our communities intact. Within trans spaces, having conversations with other trans kin, peers, lovers, elders, etc. can be a mode of seeking solace in one another, dreaming with one another, and are oftentimes conversations that enable survival within a society that historically rejects trans people. Documenting and materializing these conversations is a tangible way to have these discourses be something to return to. It is a space met with intention, for people that seek the space to speak openly about their lived truths.

Enby Spoken Histories holds conversations between trans people because these are the conversations that happen at a micro-level, in intimate spaces (homes, clubs, cars, etc.) and they often do not get recognition in spaces outside of that. There is a longstanding history as to why this is the case— a history of police violence, criminalization, and acts of dehumanization. These conversations move into spaces where there is care that ensures a safer exchange, a moment of recognition. They act as a confession, *a communication of love and mutual understanding*.

Our approach is to be space holders for dialogue between trans people. *We*, as trans people, are the ones with agency over if and how we want to bring up reflections, issues, stories, background, and/or narratives that are important to them. These are conversations, not interviews. This is not someone outside of that person's circle asking for them to explain or answer questions. These are dialogues that happen between people that understand each other

²⁴ Decolonizing systems of knowledge, such as research, can look like many different things. For us, it means revising existing systems and rebuilding them to accommodate Indigenous and decolonizing research (Del Duca, Sato, Sage, and Venable 344)

beyond that particular recording session. These are the moments like when we step out on a porch at a house warming party to talk to a queer crush, or when we are in the car for a long ride with another trans person, or the stories being shared between lovers at nighttime. *These are conversations that spark a revolution.* The ones that had to veil themselves in private spaces because of the power that they hold. This book has been a labor of love through fighting for Black lives, and our own journeys the past few months against multiple pandemics.

Enby Spoken Histories' work is rooted in love and healing, which is why we take pride in our decolonial methods inspired by Design Justice Network. We have borrowed some of their principles to inform our thinking. The following are some examples: our work is meant to sustain, heal, and empower our community, as well as seek liberation from exploitative and oppressive systems; prioritizing our work's impact on the community over our own intentions; viewing change as emergent from an accountable, accessible, and collaborative process, rather than as a point at the end of a process; we see ourselves as facilitators, not experts; trusting storytellers to bring unique contributions as experts on their own lived experiences; sharing our own knowledge and tools with our communities (e.g.: workshops on how to conduct interviews); working towards non-exploitative solutions that reconnect us to each other, and to the earth; and finally, honoring and uplifting traditional, Indigenous, and individual knowledge practices (Design Justice Network 2018).

It is very important to us to uphold conversation and communication with folks before they enter the recording space. Two months prior to our recording sessions, we begin building rapport with storytellers by having weekly phone calls leading up to the recording day. We like to get to know

the people we are working with and it is important to us to stay connected with them after the recording as well, in efforts to avoid feeding into disposability culture²⁵. In our introductory phone calls, we make it clear that they can choose whoever they want to bring in for the conversation; this person does not have to identify as transgender, but they often do. We are transparent about what their recorded conversations could be used for and make sure people understand the potential risks of having their recordings up on the Internet.

When recording with Enby Spoken Histories, storytellers might have the opportunity to sit in a recording booth, but most of the time we lack the resources to do so and instead work with local, LGBTQ+ friendly spaces. When participants come into the space, they first meet with the facilitator/s to discuss the multiple different options for consent forms, which they do not have to sign until after the recording, and where they can then make a decision to release the interview or not.

Typically, our recordings are 40 minutes long. We tell our participants to look at it as having a cup of coffee with a friend— to try to ignore the facilitator²⁶ in the room who is there for two reasons: to make sure the technical aspects of recording the audio are working, and also to interject if we feel necessary. Although facilitators mostly act as flies on the wall, we are also there in case something highly triggering comes up for one of the narrators and they need to take some space, or they need someone to talk to. With both of us coming from backgrounds of trauma informed care²⁷, we try to be cautious of signs that someone may be feeling

²⁵ Disposability culture is strongly influenced by consumerism; we do not simply treat objects as disposable, but ourselves and other people as disposable as well. Disposability of trans people can manifest in different ways, including the fact that only certain trans bodies are seen as acceptable in public spaces; trans people are continuously devalued and dehumanized, especially trans women of color. Disposability culture affects the most vulnerable, resulting in the exclusion of folks with little to no social stability.

²⁶ Co-founders take turns facilitating recordings.

²⁷ Our approach is rooted in empathy first. We place emphasis on understanding, respecting, and responding to the different effects of trauma by recognizing the signs and symptoms. Some of our techniques include, but are not limited to, ensuring safety to the best of our ability, being

uncomfortable. Additionally, we may ask narrators to expand on something or ask a follow up question, but for the most part we try to let the conversation flow naturally. After the recording is over, we take the individuals' photographs and then have them sign the consent forms according to the option²⁸ they feel most comfortable with, giving them the option to change their minds at a later time. After the conversations have been recorded and archived, we transcribe the full 40-minute conversation and put the transcript on our website for greater accessibility.

Part of the process of writing this book includes asking participants for permission to include their stories in the book, and to see if they are willing to co-edit their transcript into a shorter piece. This collaborative approach is important to us in our efforts to offer modes of decolonizing oral history methodologies. Maintaining relationships, collaborating in post-production with narrators and giving them full editorial authority, and continuously hosting events makes this both a participatory archive and community based project, much different from traditional oral history methodologies.

Post-production is very challenging because we feel that every minute that is recorded is important and should not be edited out; yet, editing is important because it makes the stories more accessible. Not everyone has the capacity or privilege to pore over books. Creating short audio pieces and edited clips from transcripts is important to us for this very reason. We also feel that by creating shorter, more palatable pieces, we can reach audiences that may not have strong literacy skills. Eventually, we hope to have as many means of dissemination as possible.

transparent about our intentions, giving individuals a choice and control, collaborating, respecting interpersonal boundaries, prioritizing empowerment, refraining from physical contact, having outside resources at hand, and practicing cultural competency.

²⁸ Enby Spoken Histories has three different consent forms. The first form releases the recording to Enby Spoken Histories as well as The Library of Congress. The second consent form is for folks that only feel comfortable releasing it to one of the two archives. The third consent form is used when a narrator has chosen not to archive the conversation and wishes for it to be deleted altogether.

We recognize the inherent power wielded in the editing process, so we work closely with narrators to make sure their edited transcript feels faithful to the overall tone of the original conversation and representative of the substance of it. We work with them to sculpt the transcripts to make them more accessible while maintaining the tone of the original source material. We choose to edit the transcripts in a way that feels and looks like poetry, keeping the raw and intimate nature of the conversation. We use capitalization when people are being louder, italics when people are emphasizing something, spacing or line breaks to represent silence. These editorial decisions are difficult to make without the participation of the storyteller, so we make sure that they review and approve the edited version, so as not to misrepresent their voices or stories. A lot of ethical issues²⁹ present themselves when we edit transcripts, but the main question we center is whether the person's voice was preserved. We edit in a way that shows intent to honor the original recording, especially by working alongside the people who recorded.

CONCLUSION

Enby Spoken Histories feels absolutely vital for this moment. It brings community together. It creates visibility without turning trans people into spectacles. Our recorded conversations make people feel seen, validated, and affirmed. Our events help people connect and connections heal people. The work we do and methods we operate under are rooted in care and love. Our stories change hearts. We create space for people to thrive, to *watch* each other thrive. To be inspired. To grow. To liberate ourselves.

²⁹ Transcribing spoken language to written language is extremely difficult, as there are hundreds of ways to do it and each method has its own advantages and disadvantages. The transcriber's decisions influence the story and have the power to change it completely, simply by attempting to correct someone's spoken grammar, for example.

Together, as a community, we are building a participatory archive. We are writing our own histories. We are sparking a movement. We are taking and demanding action. We are creating space for one another to feel seen and heard. We come together to amplify each other's voices and lift each other up. We come together to laugh together, cry together, *dream* together. We put our trust in one another and open ourselves to allow others to bear witness to the intimacies of our experiences. We are a beautiful, vibrant community, opening up radical new possibilities through stories. *Through existing as our authentic selves.*

SHAI

CHERRY

We knew
just from the moment that we met
that we were going to be in each other's lives.

What was your first impression of me?

What a great time.
Just the energy that I matched with,
like, immediately
and like,
I can't help but smile looking at you.

What was your first impression of me?

Thank.

God.

Another.

Black.

Person.

Yeah.

I just think that when I first saw you,
I was like, yes, I wanna be her friend.
You just had this beaming personality
and I just loved that about you.

I felt comfortable expressing my femininity.
It wasn't something I necessarily had to, like,

shield away.

It was something that you welcomed with open arms.

Having people you can go to and feel comfortable and feel safe with,
it's so important.

What would you say to your younger self now?

Love yourself.
Cuz' you think that you love yourself,
but do the hard thinking yourself.
Like— it's uncomfortable,
but the best things happen when you do that.

Listen to yourself.
Listen to your heart.
Be more selfish and love yourself.
But in like, a positive, healthy way.

Something I would tell my younger self...

Your frustrations are valid.

Doesn't mean you love the people that you love less.

Also, you're *so* great.

You're *so* wonderful.

And there's so much in you that you're going to see and be thankful for.

How do you identify?
Do you *want* to identify as anything?

I'm very much gender nonconforming,

Or non-binary.

Which makes me feel like I can be anything I wanna to be.

I present very masculine and sometimes

I kind of feel like that's a protection thing.

I do like having that part of myself,

but I also feel like my femininity,

the she part of it,

just comes from a place of just being naturally effeminate.

Also the way I dress.

Some days I'll just wear baggy pants and

then some days I'll wear a skirt.

But it's like more than just what you wear on your body.

It's also kind of how you carry yourself.

I've always kind of felt like I've had a maternal instinct.

I just feel like a mom with a mustache, honestly.

The bearded auntie?

Hahaha, I'm the bearded auntie, yeah.

I felt I needed a label
for me to be able to, like,
do these things and wear these things
and when people be like,
"Oh, so you wanna be, like, a girl?"
I'm like, "No!"

But then,
I started coming to terms about being
a binary Black trans woman

and I would just see the way
that they're getting killed
and harassed,
things like that,
I was so scared to start my transition
and just to admit to myself that
I *was* that.

But the moment— oof.

The moment that I,
like,
did,
it was just, um...
very freeing and just very—
it was the ultimate like,
eureka moment.

It just made so much sense
and I was so happy,
so ecstatic,
but
I was also so scared.

I *am*
a Black trans woman
sitting
before you
today.

And thank God for you.

With a burgundy smokey eye.
Y'all can't see it, but it's sickening.

The frustrations that people have
with us being visible
is that it raises questions within themselves
and it further makes them
have to question their identities
and brings up things that they don't want to feel.

I don't understand.

Why don't you want to feel that?

Why don't you want to know yourself in a deeper way?

Why don't you want to become a part of this community that's beautiful?

We don't necessarily do anything to harm you.

We just exist.

We go out *fully* ourselves
because we have no other option.
That's just who we are
and then just us existing.
It's just shedding light
and showing people at the very core,
humanity,
is all that people have.

We just keep existing.

We have to keep living.

We're always gonna be here.

There's gotta be more queer Black kids running around in the near future.
It's already happening.

If there's any Black people that feel like
they may be queer or
like
they may be out of the norms
like, shit,
if there's any Black people
that are afraid to listen to punk pop
because they feel like all they should listen to is
what people are telling them, like,
don't be afraid to be yourself!

Please.

The smallest gestures
can snowball
into the most gorgeous self-discoveries!
Really stretch out there
and just reach
for things that feel nontraditional.

We out here!

We're fully out here!

Come on,
come home,
please.

Like,
find your home—
it's there, honey.
Your home is already in yourself,
but once you find other people—
done.

I love being Black and queer.
And I love being who I am.
And I want other people to do that as well.
And I want to let my existence be an example.
There is love in knowing yourself
and there's freedom in knowing yourself
and I just want other people to be free as well.

I think it's a liberating thing to ask questions
and get answers, especially from within.
It all starts with us.
I just hope to see a future,
very near future,
that's bright and beautiful for all of us
and
I hope that there are more people
that look like us
that can have these conversations
and feel safe
about having them.

I love you, Cherry.

I love you too, Shai.

My sister.

My sister.

PIGGY

ÁNGEL

When I was younger,
I didn't really think of myself as anything.
I guess because at that point no one had put any labels on me.
It was probably when I was eleven that I was first mistaken for a boy.

How did you feel at that exact moment?
Can you look back on it?

I was shocked, actually.
It kind of just felt like someone knew something about me before I did.
I hadn't heard of anyone else who identified as non-binary
or who identified outside of what we see as, like, the two sexes.

But I had my own ideas of who I was.

I knew that I wanted to change my name
before I even knew that that was possible.
I started dressing more masculine
because I really wanted to take that part of me and
I wanted to become empowered by it.
But there were definitely some struggles during that time.
My parents didn't really understand.
I remember having some difficult conversations with them about it.
When I told my mother that I wanted to change my name,
she blew up.
She felt that it was disrespectful
of me to take something that she had given me
and change that.
But at the end of the day,

I felt like what was given to me was
something to just describe me by
until I figured out who I really was.

Going through puberty
is when I started to become anorexic.
I was starving on purpose.
I was a part of pro-ana websites,
all the nines.

And for a long time
it seemed like it was okay.

It got really bad
when I was fifteen
and then
it just continued to get worse until I was twenty.
The doctors had kept telling me, hey,
we really think you should put on weight.
But I kept going back and forth with my doctor saying,
I don't wanna gain weight.
I don't wanna have breasts.
I just didn't want to deal with it
and
I knew that I wasn't going to be able to at that time
afford surgery
and
I wasn't able to see a trans doctor
for hormones
to even get my surgery later on.

So I continued.

At my lowest

I was ninety-two pounds

And

it was actually on my 21st birthday,

I was walking to go get a tattoo, but I started feeling faint.

Because I was anorexic, I was used to keeping tuna packs with me
in case my blood sugar got low.

I didn't want to take myself to such an extreme
where this, actually, would happen.

But I knew that I wasn't feeling good
so I sat down

I ate the tuna snack.

I thought,

okay,

I just ate a little bit.

I'll be okay.

It was in an instant.

I fell to my knees.

My legs

felt like they were on fire.

And what that is,

is it's your nerves shooting off
they're misfiring, basically.

So I went to the hospital,

I got to the hospital and I told them,
hey, I'm anorexic.

My legs just gave out and
I don't know what's going on.
And that's the time they told me
your heart is racing, but
there's nothing wrong with you.

It's very hard to identify nerve damage.
That's something that you have to go to a specialist for.
So at the time, they didn't really know
there was anything wrong with me.

It took about four months
to finally get to a place where
I could start walking again.
But I definitely still do struggle with the pain.

Before I had had the fall
when I knew my anorexia was at its worst,
I actually didn't have any support.
I told my parents that I wanted to come back home
because I wanted to go to a specific anorexia hospital
and they told me that they were not going to support me in that
and that I needed to take care of myself.

So I knew that I had to be stronger
than what I was dealing with.
And even with my dysphoria,
I still have it,
but it was just a strength inside of me

that I knew I couldn't keep doing this to myself
and I had to push through
and I had to be stronger than the demons
that I was dealing with.

I'm so proud of you.
That's a lot to have to go through
without any support.
If current Piggy could go back
to Piggy, maybe at the peak
of when things were bad,
what would you tell yourself?

I really like that
because I sometimes think about that.

I would say
I know that you're struggling right now.
I know personally, of course,
that you are struggling right now.
But I want you to know that loving yourself
and taking care of your body
is more important at the end of the day.

I love you
and there's a way that you can love your body
and be true to your gender identity
and I just want you to know that.

You are stronger than anything
that can come towards you.

I am constantly reminded of that
every time that I think
there's no way I'm gonna get through this,
I get through it and I come back
ten times stronger.

SHO

L

I feel invisible.

I feel invisible in who I am as a person.

I do not feel seen
when I am perceived as a girl.

I think it's the opposite for me.

I feel *too* seen.

It's funny, like,

I just bought my first dress.

And ever since I was a kid

I would see my mom get dressed up and stuff and I'm like,

Oh I want to wear like a ball gown and stuff.

And when she would leave the house

I would like tie up my blankets to make a little skirt

and, like, walk down the stairs like I'm an actress or something.

Three weeks ago

I went to the thrift store and found

a nice velvet dress

like those girls in the 90's.

Like, do you remember *My Date With the President's Daughter*?

Like how she wore that pink dress...

That's all I wanted.

Iconic.

Iconic.

I get kind of nervous,

like even trying to put on the dress,
like I haven't walked out the house with the dress.

Oh yeah.

Because I know that dress stays in the closet.

That's the difficult part.

The beautiful shit
that you want to cover your shit in
so you feel beautiful
...but it rarely leaves the house.

I was like trying to look extra confident
Wanting to dress the way we want to dress
without being clocked
for certain reasons.

When people see me,
of course,
I'm just seen as masc,
especially like with this facial hair and stuff.
But like,
I just want to—

I just want to be seen as me.
It's like um,
seeing the Black and brown people
and trans people
being slain every day
oh, it gets to you.
You kind of become numb to it.

It's like you're seeing yourself.

You constantly see yourself being killed
over and over

When it's not talked about or taken seriously it's kind of um,
of course it'll make you angry,
but it's also what makes you
helpless.

Black and brown people have been killed constantly.
And when you're not even given the space to grieve them.

I remember talking to my mom about this.
Like, first and foremost,
she will always remind me that I am a Black person
because
that's how the world will see me
adding that I'm male presenting...
That's another strike against me,
she said.
When she heard I came out as queer,
that's another strike.

So when I see people like me being killed
and it'll be like, oh, a headline.
It'll be a hashtag.
That's one of my biggest fears
becoming a hashtag.

And I kinda get tired.

I get tired of that because it's like
I have to always sort of wear like a guard or like a mask.
Like sometimes
I don't want to have to look like I'm happy,
but if I'm in an area where I look threatening already,
I want to look like I'm happy

I guess that's why I stay home a lot these days.

GIMO

Hi, my name is Gimo.

I'm a Mexican-American, non-binary, queer artist
from Chicago, currently living in Los Angeles.

My life during quarantine, during this pandemic
has been anything but consistent.

I would say, at the very least, it's been a roller coaster
of enlightenment.

My life in general is very unconventional.

And all over the place,
though, when I had a steady job and income,
before all of this,

I was in some ways stable.

I had a routine and there were goals I aspired to.

I worked extremely hard to get to where I am,

accomplishing the smallest,

quaintest bit of security,

but it means the world to me

because I had been searching for a life

that meant I wouldn't be perpetually displaced

or felt like I had to hide who I am.

It's incredible that before this

I even had thoughts like,

Oh, there isn't enough time

to do the things that I want to do

or advance in a career as an artist.

or

I don't know if I have it in me

to speak my truths,

to fully come out as non-binary to everyone,

to live by my words.

But the fact is there is time

and there always has been time.

I just didn't give myself the agency.

Today, for example,

I sent my mom a work-in-progress drawing

of myself as a trans-masc person,

and she didn't even question it.

She told me I looked handsome

and that I looked like my brother.

She doesn't know that I'm non-binary

and also doesn't know how happy

her reaction made me.

One big thing that started to shift

and change my life during this time

was when I became very sick with a respiratory bacterial infection,

and that was around the end of March.

I was sick for over twenty days

and I know that because

I was journaling how I was feeling

for several weeks.

I was on two different types of antibiotics and antiinflammatory medication,

all of which I paid out of pocket for because I don't have health insurance.

I'm a dog walker.

I was self medicating with CBD

to help me cope with this reality,

to help me sleep,

to ease the pain,

to lessen the severity of my anxiety attacks.

I developed a paranoia

that I had no idea could exist until now,

for being outside and around other people.

Even if I was wearing a mask and gloves to protect myself,
it didn't matter because if I saw other people not wearing masks,
my throat would physically dry up and it didn't make any sense to me.

It still doesn't.

But it felt like my throat was closing and I'd forgotten

how to breathe

and swallow.

I now have this strange, but familiar obsession

with going into the bathroom

to look at my tonsils

to make sure they haven't swelled up

after being outside.

Being around other people made me feel like I would never get better.

It felt like people around me could care less about my life

and the lives of other people who were immunocompromised or sick.

I still feel this way.

I'm unapologetically an empath and have worked service jobs all my life,

I care so deeply for people on many levels,

all I want is to be there as a support system for those that need help.

When it's painfully obvious that others don't strive to do the same,

or even the bare minimum,

it makes me feel hopeless

and lose hope for our world to change for the better

when we make it out of this.

However, where there's negativity,

there is also an abundance of positivity

to combat it.

The people in the queer community,

in *our* community,

have been nothing but supportive

and comforting

and wonderful.

The constant in the chaos

within my mind

and heart

in my surroundings.

Though I am social distancing

and limiting my interactions to just my partner and my two roommates,

the amount of work we have all put in to instill a sense of safety

and comfort in our friendships and relationships

outside of our physical bodies

means everything to me.

It's painful that I'm unable to hug and hold the people that I love,

but I'm grateful to have the capacity to understand that

there are thousands of other ways of expressing

your love.

This pandemic has changed the way I view my body and my health.

Medications helped when I was sick,

but it didn't cure the underlying issues I was facing.

What I needed to change were my habits

and I have since I started feeling better.

I'm now more in tune with my health,

more than ever,

and I made an effort to create an environment for my body to thrive

again.

I am grateful for that privilege.

I think that before this I wasn't doing everything to nurture myself and be centered within.

I was just numbing the pain

physically and emotionally

numbing myself.

Overworking for financial security and stability

and for what?

To otherwise avoid the work I needed to be putting in

for my spiritual and my artistic growth?

This time,
this unusually heartbreaking time,
has given me the insight
that my life
and my non-binary body
is a blessing.

It's beautiful and sacred,
and it's important that I take care of it,
so then I'm able to be more open and accepting
of the gifts
that life has to offer.

LĒ

Hi, my name is LĒ,

and my pronouns, are they / them / he / him.

I'm a musician and fashion designer,

amongst other creative talents,

so I'll call myself an artist, in short.

I'm an African non-binary, trans-masculine presenting human

currently based in New York City,

the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic in the US.

Unlike many other peers who were able to return home

to their families near and far,

I couldn't.

For existing

as myself

in my home country, Nigeria,

would be extremely unsafe for me.

I made the hard decision to stay alone in the states
while families reunited over a global and economic catastrophe.

I'm currently in Brooklyn

in an apartment of a dear friend

who offered their place for me and my pet cat

to seek shelter

and wait things out,

but before this pandemic,

I had been having issues settling somewhere this year,

and the pandemic brought fears of homelessness into bay

as I didn't know what to do with myself and my pet.

And thankfully,

my chosen family in the city stepped up and helped me,

to which I'll be forever and eternally grateful for,

so I'm going to start by saying thank you to them.

Quarantine

has been like living in the Twilight Zone

as a musician.

I composed a song months before this outbreak

about our current reality

and how we have all been sucked into this big claim of global capitalism

that stifles human emotion

and connectivity

with one another.

So this goes across race, religion, ethnicity, accessibility, queerness and other facets.

Here's an excerpt of the song that I wrote.

It goes like this:

Plastic air and acid waters,

humans ignoring the signs,

no longer are we awake,

we're pawns in this big man's game,

searching for paradise.

But I'll wait.

I'll wait for you.

And I'll wait.

For you.

With time,

and love,

we will make it through.

So I sing the song

to remind myself and *you*

of the baseline of the song of healing,

and it's love.

This time in quarantine has pulled me

to looking inwards

and finding compassion

for everything that is.

Understanding my parents,
home countries refuse to accept the LGBTQ community
based on ancestral trauma driven by colonization,
understanding generational traumas
and
taking time to remove fear,
guilt,
and embracing this powerful
and unexplainable force called
love rain.

Besides using my voice
as a tool of healing,
I'm currently working on a beautiful album
inspired by spiritual, you know,
philosophical aspects
and very, very natural.

I have also been using my body as a tool for healing.

Being trans and under a shy journey

of transitioning in quarantine,

I found dance

as a practice in healing my dysphoria

while I feel so unsettled in my body.

I use it to ground myself to the present.

When my heart and mind begin to reject my body,

my parts...

I battle myself,

bury myself constantly,

often feeling guilty

of wanting to go through processes

that brings more of my identity out of fear.

A shame from my blood family,

so I remind myself of my chosen ones,

ones who have walked into my life helping me to pick up

my shattered pieces

and allow me to feel seen.

I have been looking into a broken image of myself

for so long, and I'm still

working on allowing myself to see myself clearly.

To who is listening,

I don't know everything in this life,

but if you are feeling what I'm feeling,

I feel you in missing the most simplest things

as hugging another person.

I want you to know that you're never alone,

no matter how alone you feel

and that you can find the best comfort

and places you least expected it.

Know that it's okay to cry,

to be confused,

to feel pain,

because right now

we're all connected.

We're all in pain.

So I'll start by saying to you,

I love you.

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