

GENDER PERSONAL

EXPLORING GENDER VARIANCE THROUGH ART



Rafael/a

**Gender Personal
Interview**

Acknowledgement:

Understanding Grows, Views Change

This interview is part of the Gender Personal project (2013-2014) created by Jacqui Beck. For an overview of the project, including its origin, visit www.genderpersonal.org.

The following is a transcript of two of the nine interviews done for the Gender Personal project. Seven people were interviewed once each, and Jacqui's son, Finnbar, was interviewed twice.

Since that time, the people who were interviewed have grown in their understanding of themselves and their gender. Please take this into consideration as you read.

Appreciation

A huge thank you to everyone who participated in this project, especially to those I interviewed. A more detailed list of thanks may be found at <http://genderpersonal.org/project-origin/#gratitude> (this link will open in your web browser).

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Gender Personal: Interview with Rafael/a

1. How old were you when you started to experience your gender as different from what the world seemed to expect?

Rafael/a: I'd say the moment I was born, but I don't know exactly what they were doing the moment I was born. I've seen pictures of me though. I have to figure out when I was aware of the expectations.

I remember being about four or five on a beach, probably in northern California, and I was walking with a stalk of seaweed and a toy cell phone, like a Barbie phone, and I was just chatting away, the diva walking down the beach. And I remember this man stopped me and said: "Well, hello, little lady! Where are you going?" And I just flipped my hair at him and kept walking. And I remember those moments of inhibition starting to set in, of being so big and being so in your body—that's kind of disturbing. [And they] ask you, "What are you doing? Where are you going?" [And they start to] interrupt it. And that's when I began to notice gender at all.

I didn't really notice clothing that much. I only noticed clothing in that it was uncomfortable like tights and stuff. Mostly I just didn't like what I was given. I just didn't like the style—it was the '80s. Stirrup leggings . . .

Jacqui: Do you have siblings?

Rafael/a: Yes, I have one older sister. [And, regarding gender,] it's hard to really isolate when I noticed it for myself, because I grew up emulating who I was around and their gender, and I was raised by really strong women of color, and one really gentle man of color, and so my mom and my sister both taught me about masculinity and taught me about how to survive in a white man's world—taught me how to be hard femmes, basically, you know?

And my mom's like a *power* dyke. That's all I can really gender her as, and she's a fucking dragon. And my sister—when I was growing up she went through a lot of evolution over what she wore also, because we were here when she was in high school. And that's kind of when I began to be aware of presentations and I—I'm about seven years younger—so I was just always tagging along trying to follow her.

That was about the grunge era here, but she was a young woman of color really hating the whole scene and was trying to cling to what she had of hip hop and whatever remnants of color she could find living on Capitol Hill—we lived in Capitol Hill. So she dressed very *chola*. That's all I really remember.

She had huge elephant jeans and giant plaid shirts but black lipstick. She was a jock too, and she hung out with all queer folks and never identified as queer, but just was like, "These are my friends."

And I really followed . . . She was called tomboy a lot. I don't know. That was what I was given of how women are expected to dress and be. To me the differences I saw were actually [that] women of color are not really seen as feminine to begin with. Women of color aren't even included in this normalized gender presentation because that presentation was attached to whiteness. So I think when I began to notice not being what the gender expectation was of me [I] said to myself, "Oh, I'm not a white girl." And [I'm] very happy about that and also understand [that] this is part of the game here.

Jacqui: How old are you?

Rafael/a: I am going to be twenty-seven next week.

Jacqui: Ooh. Happy Birthday!

Rafael/a: Thanks.

2. Tell me about your experience of yourself regarding your gender? How do you identify regarding your gender?

Rafael/a: At this point in time, I feel that I am part of a legacy of sacred gender, and that's really the only words in English that I can put to it.

Jacqui: Do you have words in Spanish?

Rafael/a: No, I lost Spanish a long time ago.

Jacqui: That's too bad, eh?

Rafael/a: I'm trying to get that back.

Jacqui: So can you tell me the words again? Sacred?

Rafael/a: Gender.

Jacqui: Sacred gender.

Rafael/a: There have been sacred genders throughout all of time and all around the world, right? I feel like some people in the trans* community are aware of it, [though] some people aren't. I think it really is cultural and what connections you have to your ancestry or not and whether or not you choose to honor it, if you have the privilege to know of it too, right? A lot of us [people who are gender variant], have been expelled from our families and so it's like, who knows? Or maybe you're adopted and have no idea, or whatever you're raised with or chosen, you know?

I feel like all kinds of ancestors come through to all of us. They might be linked to our blood, they might not. But I feel like there's a lot more documented in our elders' consciousness than we think and [have] written down about sacred genders and about transcending genders.

This is all a very Western and English way to talk about it. I feel like we don't find a lot of documentation about it because it wasn't a thing. It's just one of the many ways humans are.

So now that we're sitting in this culture and place and time, we have this word "transgender" and gender and roles attached [to it]. Living in this place and time, I've definitely worked through identity-land and it was definitely a place to pull me up and wake me up in certain ways, but then obviously it's just so limited at the same time.

Identity is a weird thing for me because I don't feel like how I am is necessarily what I've chosen. Identity isn't often, in a lot of ways, a choice. Because you can be a person of color but you might not be aware of it, and you may not choose to identify in that way.

Because I feel like "person of color" is a very political term. "Queer," "trans*," are similar things, and I think part of why I identify with the trans community is only as an act of solidarity and to increase visibility, but I don't know that I actually feel part of . . . I don't know. What is "trans* community?"

Jacqui: Well to me the word "transgender" is you start one place and you *trans* to something else, and it doesn't sound like what you're talking about. What you're talking about is an opening up—a different way of orienting to the whole concept of gender, it sounds like . . .

Rafael/a: Yeah I feel like coming into wakefulness around my body and spirit was then classified as being trans and it was simultaneous with awakening into my color and my ancestry, which I was aware of always growing up, but I grew up pretty assimilated here in Seattle.

Like I'm read as Asian a lot, so when you're read as Asian and female you can pretty much go under the radar if you're in a mostly white school or whatever spaces. If you just act right you can get through and then get the good grades and be quiet and just, you know, have your head down.

But people are always, "there's something weird about you" and they don't know what it is. And I'm like, "Well, I know I'm a different color but what else is it?" And so when I actually began to understand: *Oh, "people of color" isn't some old term my parents use and its time is past.*

Because in schools when I was growing up they really tried to make us believe like, "It's okay you guys, everything's fine now. Racism doesn't exist, MLK's great. We're all past it." I'm always being like, well why do things . . . I have this taste in my mouth that I can't articulate to you and I don't know . . . if it's safe to articulate it here actually.

It was like I was born with these weapons locked underneath and I don't know when it's okay to fire. So it's like, okay, let me just get out first. Get the degrees my mom has almost killed herself to let me have, to get these things that my grandpa almost died for, to get us here.

There are these weird legacies I'm carrying! But I feel like for me it was my bridge into self-actualization and realization, really.

Jacqui: And that's one reason sort of open-ended questions are what we're doing, because it's becoming clear to me that being a person of color is so much a part of who you are, and gender is of course so much a part of who you are. But there's no way to disengage those parts of yourself. God, I love talking to you.

3. How long did you know you were gender variant?

Jacqui: Okay, so this is . . . Let's just say, how long? This question is about coming out. This is about sharing. So, have you felt like you knew things inside about your gender identity that you didn't feel safe or comfortable sharing, and how has that progressed for you?

Rafael/a: So have I felt that way?

Jacqui: Have you ever felt that way?

Rafael/a: Okay, and do you want to know when or how long ago? The timing of that?

Jacqui: Like can you talk to your family?

Rafael/a: It's funny, because yeah, people used to have that question, "So when did you come out?" And I was like, "Come out as what?" I never came out as anything to anyone. I had a hard time figuring out if I was human. You know what I mean? It's like, *What do people do here? It's so weird.* I just never understood people growing up.

I was always by myself most of the time growing up, always observing and feeling like a little creature. Very out of place, so I think from a young age I had a different language with myself—probably speaking with my ancestors most of the time but I didn't realize that. My mom said that in my crib I was always singing to myself and babbling to myself and she was like, "Who are you talking to?"

I think around the first puberty time it was just like, that's when you begin to silence things more in terms of your wants for yourself and your desires in general. I think a lot of folks tend to begin to learn it's not okay to ask for what you want.

But in terms of gender, it was right when I entered undergrad, because suddenly I'm getting more access to all of this other information. And my best friend from high school, who was also my first girlfriend, is also trans*. We both didn't realize we were super gender fluid. Also at the time we went to an all-girls Catholic high school. We were read as boys all the time, and we thought we were stealth too. It's so dumb. It's so obvious and out.

I never told my parents about that, but they watched me. They saw me do everything: they watched me cut my hair, they saw me changing clothes all the time. Apparently my mom cried

when I cut my hair the first time. I was raised with long hair and bangs, and I remember it was around eighth grade I cut it all off.

My sister's like, "Mom cried." [And I thought] *Why are you telling me that? I don't know what to do about that, because she has hair, you have hair, she has all this hair.* I didn't get it, right?

But now, to me actually, it's like cutting your ancestry off, for me, because at least where a lot of indigenous folks come from, hair is very important. And whether you cut it or not, just be aware of your hair. And especially for Mexica folks, your hair is your connection; it's like the rays of the sun, so having it long is really important. I think too, just off Turtle Island, and native folks in general, it's also how we identify each other, like seeing our hair.

Jacqui: Tell me about your history, like what's the, what you're from? I don't know that word.

Rafael/a: Mexica? So, a lot of folks you might hear like Aztec, but a lot of people think we died out or were non-existent, extinct.

Jacqui: And Mexica is Aztec?

Rafael/a: Yeah, you'll hear a lot of different names, though. Because Aztec, it was just one of many different groups and tribes and then the conquistadors came and kind of squished them: "Well, you guys are all Aztec." So there are actually quite a few folks. And Aztecs did go around and bring a lot of people together in some forceful ways. But actually I'm still learning a lot about that. Mexica is just one word that we use.

Jacqui: So you didn't have a sense . . . Coming out has been not like, "Oh, I'm going to (or not going to) tell you something?"

Rafael/a: No, I'm just doing what I'm doing.

Jacqui: Discovering and emerging as yourself, it sounds like . . .

Rafael/a: It was in undergrad that I felt like . . . eventually I did [come out]. I wrote a letter to my parents, because I had decided that I was going to pursue surgery, I think, as well as hormones. I think I was telling them about surgery. I don't know. That was all very new for me. I did not see that coming.

I was like, *I have my body, whatever.* And then Creator was just like: "You gotta do this." And I'm like, *Okay.* And I fought with it a lot in my brain, but eventually this is just a visceral thing that needs to come through. This isn't about you. You just need to do this. This is just part of your journey right now.

Jacqui: Big step though . . .

Rafael/a: Yeah, and I wanted to let my parents know, and I was ready to be kicked out. I mean, I was at school, but I was ready to be exiled. Whatever they prepare us for as trans* kids: "Oh,

you're never going to be accepted . . . none of us have our families any more. Get ready. We have each other."

Yeah, so I wrote them a letter and I tried to give them a few references to look up if they wanted. But I came out as genderqueer. That was it, and I was like, "And then I'm going to do surgery, and hormones." I wasn't really talking about trans* stuff, like, "I'm gender fluid—this is how I feel," blah, blah, blah. But I also felt like I needed to [say to] them, "Hey, here are the pronouns that I want. I'm just going to shift it way over because I need to break you out of the habit of what you've grown up with with me, and so even though I don't feel *he* and *him* necessarily, I'm just gonna make you use that now for me, cause I need you to just break the circuits."

And so I started doing stuff like that with them. They were quiet for a while after that letter and then my mom eventually talked to me.

Mostly I was worried about my mom. I feel like my dad and I have always had a pretty good relationship. We're like best friends, practically. We're like kids together, a lot of the time. He's always just like, "You know, I know I don't understand everything about what you do in your life in general, and I'm never gonna quite get it, but I want to make sure that I support you and love you. I'm just worried about your safety healthwise." He's a doctor and so he just had concerns around those kinds of things. He said "I know I have a lot to learn though, so . . ."

But my mom . . . you know I grew up under . . . I clearly feel like . . . she was like, um . . . she has intense PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. I was raised by her PTSD. She's a survivor of sexual assault, and so am I, and those ways of surviving are passed on and also a really deep hatred of cisgendered men.

To tell her that this gender you've identified me so strongly with and is really part of your safety in a lot of ways, is really not entirely what I'm carrying here, and I'm carrying other things.

So I was really afraid of her shutting down or pushing me away, or thinking that I'm pushing away women, or I'm pushing away womanhood or any of the legacy of women in my life. That was really what I was afraid of—[that she would think] I was rejecting some part of myself. And I'm like, "I'm not rejecting anything and there's nothing being left behind. I'm just being real with you about how I am and who I'm becoming as much as I can."

She did kind of have a hard time with it actually, I think, but more away from me. She did that on her own but with me she was just trying to ask me the questions she could and was feeling okay with genderqueer and was feeling safer around that. She was like, "Okay, okay, so I don't have to convert to having a son now."

Jacqui: You're not joining the dark side.

Rafael/a: I almost would say that I want to call her a feminist, but I actually see that as a very white thing, like I see feminists as white women. I remember her telling me, "That stuff's for white women. We've always been doing that, so don't get it twisted, okay?"

And so I would say that at first I thought she was thinking I was rejecting these things, like feminism and stuff, but actually that never occurred to her. But yeah, I guess she did go to a therapist eventually [to deal with] my transitions physically. I don't know who this therapist was but they were telling her: "Oh, you're going to have to mourn your daughter and you're going to have a son now." [The therapist was] telling her all this stuff and my mom went through a really huge crisis apparently and didn't talk to me about it. Later she did share it, and I was like, "Who are those therapists? This is not what's happening! Talk to me, Mom. You're not losing anybody."

4. Did you have any experience of being afraid to come out? Like "I know that this is true about myself but I'm afraid to tell it or show it."

Rafael/a: No.

Jacqui: Are you experiencing that at all now?

Rafael/a: No. I think what I experience is like knowing the daily threat of being however I present depending on where I'm going in the city or how I'm getting places. I have to think about that, just daily safety.

Jacqui: So daily threat of . . .

Rafael/a: Of violence, harassment by, you know, all kinds . . . from the police, people on the street, whatever.

Jacqui: And have you experienced that?

Rafael/a: Yeah. Hold on, back up. To first coming out, then? Being afraid around that?

Jacqui: Mm hmm.

Rafael/a: Or just like, 'cause there really is no first time, I think. I just was starting to present differently always, so I think that's why I've never been afraid. It's just I've always been read as different, whatever that means, so wherever I am I'm always different. So it's kind of like, okay, I guess I'm not afraid of different.

But my sister, I remember she didn't really know what to do around all this for a bit. Didn't really say anything but, I think she was . . . I shared stuff around articulating gender in a Western sense with her when she asked me to be a bridesmaid at her wedding. I was like, "I can't wear that dress, sis." And she was like, "Why not?" She went ape shit on me, screaming at me in the street.

Jacqui: Wow!

Rafael/a: She thought I was trying to make a statement basically, trying to be all political, blah, blah, blah . . . and I'm like "I really just can't. I don't know if you get this." So, eventually I explained it to her. But actually she was the first person I really told in my family, and it was really raw then, right?

And what she was the most upset about was the way I told her because she was like "You think I'm one of those dumb kids at your school you go to or your college. And [that I'm] not gonna get this . . ." She's like, "I get it," and she just went off on me. "It's like you act like I'm gonna reject you or something." [And I thought,] *What's going on, you're getting mad at me for . . . ?*

But actually she said she didn't really understand this process for me until she saw how happy I was becoming. She said: "Ever since I've known you, you've never wanted to be here on Earth. You've always been trying to leave."

And that was something I felt a bunch, like I've been suicidal since, I don't remember, probably since I was five, but maybe more consciously since I was eight. And that was just that . . . I don't know. That's a whole different relationship.

And so coming into hormones and then later surgery was like: *I have something. I planned something for myself. I'm looking towards this thing, and because I'm doing this thing, that means I'm changing because I want to be here.* It's about the fact that you're investing in doing this thing means that you're going to be here after that event also, like after the surgery.

And I noticed that in myself and my sister also noticed, "You're happy, like you're being a normal young twenty-something. You want to do things and go out." She just saw a shift in me.

Jacqui: And connecting more with people, too?

Rafael/a: Yeah, probably, although I really withdrew for about a year or so. I actually cocooned up.

Jacqui: You cocooned up and then started to emerge?

Rafael/a: Yeah, she saw that. And I think a few people around me who were childhood friends or parents of my friends actually were like, "Oh, this is the new Raf." They were kind of noticing, and it wasn't really about how I looked as much as "You're just bright now or there's something shining through. You're landing here." You know?

Jacqui: Like committing to life, in some way.

Rafael/a: Something, yeah . . .

Jacqui: This is so huge, really. Wow. Okay, thank you.

Now what I'm thinking, what I'm sensing with you and actually from my son Finnbar, is an opening, if you get what I'm saying? It's like, once you push on the binary of gender, the binary

of race—white, not white . . . But what about coming out as a human being? What about owning your humanity, in a sense?

Rafael/a: Basically.

Jacqui: Holy shit! No, because one of the huge things that I'm looking at is suicide and this part of our culture.

Rafael/a: Yeah, well, let's talk about it.

Jacqui: No, it's huge.

Rafael/a: Yeah, and especially in our community.

Jacqui: I know. But . . .

Rafael/a: It's not homicide.

Jacqui: Well, that's another risk, you know?

Rafael/a: Yeah, that's the thing.

Jacqui: I know it. You've got the other people saying: "You're freaking me out here by pushing on something that I'm not ready to look at, so I'm going to kill you, or hurt you." Good idea, people.

Rafael/a: Or just put you in a place where you're going to kill yourself, and do it for us.

Jacqui: Right, I'm going to make it so uncomfortable for you to be around that you're going to say, "Okay, I'm quitting, I'm leaving."

Rafael/a: I know. I mean whenever I sit in that place again, I'm like, "Don't do the job for them." That's what I have to tell myself all the time. *Don't do the job for them.*

Jacqui: You know what? I just wrote a poem, and I think the title is "Not Even for You Will I Kill Myself." And it's a huge road . . .

5. How has your view of gender or your relationship to gender changed over time?

Rafael/a: I feel like the more pivotal shift for me [was] when my brain and my heart started to finally talk. I began to understand that my gender is sacred and that it's been carried since humans have been doing their thing, by my ancestors.

And so understanding that [people with] genders that are fluid (or in between or around and outside of, too) were often the religious emcees. Like we were writing the ceremonies, we were doing a lot of sacred work, we were building bridges, we were doing a lot of healing work.

We were just working overtime, because we were doing twice as much labor [day-to-day and spiritual]. And that we were often valued, and maybe not more than or less than, but we were just as much valued as anyone else.

And maybe sometimes we did get a lot more respect and sometimes we were still often really oppressed. I'm not going to romanticize indigenous peoples and our ways either.

So I think when I began to understand that, I felt just that lineage lock in, like, *You are right to be here right now*. Not only do you have the right, but you *are* right to be here. So that was my shift around understanding gender, because I realized, *Oh, I don't have to play this white game of gender*. Like I'm never going to pass as male, but I don't know if I'm going to pass as female now either.

And realizing that those things are very attached to whiteness, and also to different class too. All these different things . . . but really, I was the wrong color.

Because when I got the little list of all these things that are going to happen when you get on T [testosterone], and I was reading all these things, I was like—I'm not gonna get hairy! There's no hair on any of the men in my family. I was looking at . . . losing hair, different kinds of blood pressure, cholesterol . . . I was just like, *Okay*.

Then also [there was an] assumption of how you're going to now be read in the world and how things will shift around you. There was still a huge assumption around whiteness and how it's intersecting with your gender. I'm not gonna be white, dude, though. None of these things are going to happen. I'm still gonna continually be emasculated if I do want to pass as an Asian male. Or some other ambiguous male.

And then you want to add queer to the top of it, 'cause I'm not a straight trans* person. And I saw these twinkie Asian gay boys and I had this fleeting fantasy of wanting to be like one of them.

But I was like, *This is the same shit I just came from. I'm not trying to go there*. It's just like ceremony walking and you know I don't really vibe with the word "colonization,"—it's more like de-ceremonialization of our peoples. It's like being broken away from our ritual and from sitting with every act we do as sacred and affecting this larger picture. And when that's happening, then I'll forget myself and then I'm trying to fit into these things that . . .

Jacqui: Have you found people to connect with that get that?

Rafael/a: Yeah, you know, I mean it's hard but yeah.

Jacqui: You don't need a hundred.

Rafael/a: Yeah, I don't. That's too many. Yeah, and you know folks that I feel like understand that more and more are not necessarily trans* folks that I'm meeting or fluid. So I find myself surrounded more and more by straight-identified folks or cis folks of color and in ceremony.

And you know there's a few random genderqueer and fluid and trans* folks and they're usually young people of color who have seen me in my work or my art and are just being like "Oh, yeah."

I feel like younger generations are echoing it but I've found some elders too. But it's interesting in the generational gap, like, our language differences and trying to talk to each other but still having commonality in our ceremonies, and really that's why I'm sitting with them. I'm not trying to make them be more PC [politically correct] or anything. I'm just like, "I try to understand what you're saying and if you don't get how I'm fluid . . ." Because I meet older trans* people of color who are just, "I am, this is . . . we don't go back and forth." And I'm like, "Okay." But I've struggled to carve space, and [I say] "I'm here now, and this is how I am. And so in ceremony I'm going to be doing [things people of both genders do]. You can kick me out, that's fine, but that's just how I am."

Jacqui: Show up as yourself.

Rafael/a: Yeah, I can't really pick one [gender]. So I've actually had to . . . so as romantic as it might seem to find sacred gender in ceremony, you get kicked out a lot. Because even though these folks might have come back to their ceremonies or have always had them, there's still a very Western influence. There's still that colonizing influence and there's a lot of homophobia and transphobia in all of our communities of color and native communities.

There might be space and times for two-spirited folks, and even then that's associated with queer too, not necessarily trans*. When I hear anyone say "two spirit," that just means two spirits, right? That means Trans*. That's how I understand it. That's me. I mean, I feel more than that, but at least two.

Every day they're still in a really Western white media world and they're still constantly operating off these different gender underpinnings and so when you're there in ceremony and you're wearing both male and female regalia or you're praying for both times or you're smoking both pipes, they don't like that.

So I always have to ask for permission first, 'cause I don't want to disrespect anyone's ceremony. I've learned you don't push your shit in peoples' ceremony because it just doesn't matter.

It's really hard to say that, because I'm like, "These are my ancestors." You need them to know that this is part of . . . but you learn that that's your ego. Let go . . . do you want to learn these ways or not?

[So I say to myself] *You're just going to smoke the men's pipe today. Don't feel like you're denying all of your grandmothers right now. Don't go crying about your womb. Just sit here and smoke the damn men's pipe, because the fact that you're even allowed to do that right now is pretty trippy. And then maybe next ceremony, go sit and smoke the women's pipe. They might look at you funny, like, "Weren't you sitting over there last time?" Who cares?*

So this is how you continue to just walk in both ways. You can't always do it all at once maybe, and maybe once in awhile, some elders will be like: "Hey two-spirit folks, if you're here, you can sit wherever you want or you can do both right now." And you'll have those random moments where you're like "Yay!"

Jacqui: So you're kind of being a pioneer? A spiritual pioneer?

Rafael/a: I don't think so.

Jacqui: You don't feel that?

Rafael/a: I'm just following whatever it is my ancestors are telling me.

Jacqui: So you don't see yourself as someone who's a trailblazer?

Rafael/a: No, this trail just got grown over, you know? So that's all.

6. How have writers and other people (so it might be spiritual people in groups or whatever) affected you or helped you?

Rafael/a: Chrystos. Do you know Chrystos, the poet? She's a two-spirit native poet. She actually lives around here now. She lived in Seattle for a long time though.

You should look her up. She's a lesbian, two-spirit, native, activist poet. She was around . . . I feel like her voice was really big, it always is big, but in the '80s she was more well known, I guess, for her poetry, but she's pulled in. But only recently now we're starting to get her . . . she's one of our elders now and we're trying to get her to come back out and read a little bit. Her voice is just so important. But yeah, she saved my butt, her work.

Jacqui: Good to know, yeah.

Rafael/a: Because, yeah, she talked about all the things I was just naming. She also really channeled that rage around whiteness. She's mixed white and native. She's just channeled the rage she has about being that bridge and not wanting to be that bridge. So she just hit on a lot of the things that I've been navigating. I think I started reading her stuff when I was in undergrad.

Jacqui: Have you hung out with her?

Rafael/a: A little bit once after the reading that she finally was at recently. That was her first time reading in years.

Jacqui: That was recently?

Rafael/a: Yeah, it was a couple of months ago. I got to talk to her a little bit after. She's really funny, just super down to earth. She has no illusions. She's like, "I'm just struggling . . ."

It also just makes me upset that she's struggling. You're one of our elders. Your voice has been around for a long time. You should have more . . . you should be more sustained by now. It makes me sad.

So yeah, definitely her work. Trying to think . . . I feel like I was reading books when I was starting to figure out, you know when I was first coming out into this Western way of life . . . “Oh, I'm trans* I guess, you know.” I feel like *Transgender Warriors* [by Leslie Feinburg] was a book I remember reading. I think that's when I was learning about sacred roles of trans* folks, but I don't remember finishing the book . . .

Jacqui: There's some good stuff in there.

Rafael/a: But I didn't really read a whole lot actually. I think I realized, *Oh, these books can't really tell me a lot. They're going to tell me stuff but this is just going to be my journey, so let's just go with it.*

I watched a lot of YouTube videos of guys for a little while, trans guys, but I got bored, too. It all felt so far away—physical transition—that I was like, *Why am I torturing myself watching these guys?*

But mostly it was community people around me [that helped]. I [had]really cocooned up. And there are two folks that lived next door to me. We all were in apartments in a row. There was a trans girl and a trans guy and they both went to my school. I didn't really know them that well, but I knew them through the community and they ended up being my trans* parents. I called them my trans* parents cause they like totally birthed me and sat up with me late at night all the time and you know just hung out and talked with me.

Jacqui: So were they sort of . . .

Rafael/a: Yeah, they were further along in their physical transitions for sure. I didn't have really any prayer community at that time. There was a medicine bag that was sent to me by my auntie, right before my surgery, and I think that's when it all fucking dropped on me, like literally just dropped on my head. It was just like, once that medicine bag was in my hands—it was hers, she sent it to me—she told my mom to tell me: “This is going to help you heal through your surgery and keep you safe. When you come back up to Seattle (I was in LA at the time), bring it to me and I'm going to have another one made for you.”

Jacqui: Tell me what a medicine bag is.

Rafael/a: So this one . . . everyone has different traditions . . .

Jacqui: Can you wear it?

Rafael/a: Yeah, you can. Everyone has different traditions, and this one is from Haida Gwaii up in Alaska. My auntie has connections there. She has a crazy story. Basically it's just medicine to help you heal and everyone has different things inside of theirs depending on their traditions, and

usually people will never know what's inside. It's to protect you and . . . I don't know. To me it's also like a calling card. You can track each other through it.

Jacqui: Interesting. So have you made yourself one?

Rafael/a: No, she had one made for me when I brought it back to her. That's what she said. But once I got that bag though, that bag started doing its work, and I started doing rituals for myself . . . going to the beach and doing different things or I was like, *I don't know where I'm coming from but I'm just going to do this*, because I'm weird like that. Later now being in native ceremonies here and being part of a danza group, the things that I had been doing are not that different from what I'm doing now. And it just kind of came through—I'd never seen these things before—it had just come through to do them.

7. What do you want others to understand about how you experience yourself and your gender?

Jacqui: Like maybe what are people not getting?

Rafael/a: I don't think it's any of their business.

Jacqui: Okay, but when you interface with the world, is there stuff that's . . .

Rafael/a: Yeah, I think at this point now I'm just like, *I don't really care because it's never going to be what I want*, but I guess at this moment, I don't know, I always feel like a cross-dressing boy, like that's how I remember articulating it eventually.

Jacqui: So you identify kind of as a cross-dressing boy?

Rafael/a: I guess, kind of, but not really. I guess, yeah, that was one way of saying it. I don't know, I just feel like a hard femme, femme boy. I think I constantly put the two together and I don't necessarily go the other way where I'm like feeling like a masculine girl, because that's how I was growing up I think, where I was read a lot as that. But then not—actually I was really femme-y too.

Jacqui: Maybe it's like: I'm not putting myself in a box. I'm in this moment being me, wearing what I want to wear, expressing to myself how I want to express myself, and it's not always going to come from the same place because I've got lots of places. Something like that?

Rafael/a: I guess. I think mostly it's just like I need to have all elements present at once, usually. It's really hard . . . like the drag to me is [when I'm] completely read as like one, like passing as cis. So where I used to work I wanted to make sure I had male pronouns—not male pronouns—he and *him* pronouns.

Jacqui: What kind of pronouns?

Rafael/a: *He* and *him*. Can't believe I said male pronouns; like what are male pronouns? I wanted to go by *he* and *him*. I wanted to just be read as a guy because I just knew I couldn't handle being read as a girl—that was mostly my thing.

It's kind of strange being read as a gay man, [though] I'm really happy about it, but am I really being read the way . . . and you know there's kind of this spiral, right?

And then eventually when I bleed I like to wear skirts or a something like a circle around my waist because I want that connection to the earth. And how do I fucking wear a dress at work right now? Am I getting read as a trans girl? I don't want to be read as a cis-girl, but am I okay being read as a trans girl? Yeah, I'm okay with that. But what's that gonna do with how people are going to be with me at work? So there's this constant cycling through presentations and genders. I've been read as any one you can think of.

So, I think mostly I really appreciate being read as a boy of any kind. I mostly just really want to be read as a boy. I don't say man—man's kind of weird. I don't really know . . . I don't know if I understand that either.

I always say boy for some reason and I think that's very interesting, because boys are definitely treated differently than men. It's like a constant diminutive thing happening. And yeah, a lot of ageism is so prevalent, you know, for trans* folks. We get treated so . . . some of us are fucking like thirty-five and we're being treated like we're eighteen.

It's interesting that I still identify with boy though. I don't know, but yeah, no matter how I'm dressed, it would be really awesome if I could be read as some kind of masculine person though, because I really appreciate femme masculinity.

But it's interesting because the kind of masculinity I've seen (like gay men or butch women and dykes) can get really harmful. Femininity [can] too because it's so often ragging on some gender.

But I was always really drawn to femme-y men and queeny men, but I really wasn't sure why. And I'm realizing there's a lot of self hatred there and a lot of internalized stuff—a lot of misogyny.

I don't know how to interact; I'm not a fag—I wish I was. How can I? I don't have that confidence, but actually that confidence is just a lot of bravado too, and it's not real and it's self-protection too. And there're a whole lot of things happening that I don't understand it. I think I really appreciate being able to be a femme and read as a femme aggressive or a hard femme. But I'm still [trying to understand] it. I'm very young in that, that part of it too. I think sometimes I want to try on the queendom, because I've never allowed myself to be big, you know?

So it's almost like, *Well shit, we should really just . . .* I just bought three lipsticks the other day, you know what I mean. *Okay Raf, you'll have to figure this out.* It's a genderfuck, for sure.

Jacqui: Complex.

8. What is gender?

Rafael/a: Gender's a white construct of what we're supposed to be, just another one. Because I don't think it's attached to bodies at all, but now we've attached it to bodies. I don't know. I think gender's just . . . it can be liberating as much as it can be oppressive. I just see it as another identity, another way of accessing the world, of interacting with the world. Yeah, it's just like another interface, you know? That's all I've got.

9. What have you learned about gender and gender expression?

Rafael/a: I've learned that no matter how much you realize it doesn't matter, it still often matters, and it's so annoying how much it matters. And not even like: oh, it's going to affect whether I get this job or whether or not you get beat up, or whether or not this person's going to find you attractive. It's not even that.

It's almost like how much it still matters to me at some point, the presentation. How much I'll still have a freakout where it's just like: "Oh, my God! There're clothes everywhere! I can't get dressed. I can't go out today. This is insane."

And I don't like that I still go through those and it'll randomly just pop up out of nowhere [at the] last minute. You're like, "Fuck!" My partner is like: "Oh, God. Okay. You're gonna be okay." You know? And it's just clothes and I just can't figure out why I can't knock it.

I think that's what I've been learning about. Presentation and gender: as much as you unpack it and dissect it, it's something that I constantly deal with. And as much as you can be like, *I'm over it*, it's such a privileged thing to say, as trans or cis. Until other folks push against their own barriers, you're still going to deal with it every day, because they haven't dealt with it.

Jacqui: Do you have thoughts about the words "gender variant," "genderqueer," "gender - nonconforming," "transgender"? Do you have thoughts about words like that?

Rafael/a: [They are] just different ways to articulate and find some kind of semblance of yourself, I think, in the English language. I don't think about those words a lot because I'm trying to learn about all the different words we have in the rest of our communities in the world—all of our indigenous words for what people might call trans* or gender fluid or variant. But a lot of times they don't translate to the same thing in different languages and cultures. You can find similar words but they just don't quite translate the same because the languages are so different too, the way they're constructed. So what I think more about these days is trying to track those things, because I don't want to waste my brain space on English any more.

Jacqui: A word is just . . . it holds something that it can't hold. A word tries to give concreteness to something that's not concrete, and it stops things instead of letting them be . . .

Rafael/a: That's how I feel English is though. I've been hearing words from different languages and learning about [them]. But you have to learn about that language too because often words

communicate a relationship [not just a simple concept]. It actually communicates what the thing does too, and how people interact with it.

Jacqui: Not just what it is in this static moment . . .

Rafael/a: Yeah, and so the words around gender or roles in human behavior—they're also more nuanced and complex, and usually have a cosmic connection too, and so those are the words I think about.

Jacqui: But you can see how if people have grown up experiencing gender as a binary thing, where there's *female* over here and *male* over here, and all of a sudden they meet you. And it would be like, *Holy shit! I can't deal with this because it stirs up stuff that I can't handle.*

10. Why do you think people are afraid of gender variance?

Rafael/a: I think all my answers are the same . . . Well, who are the people you're talking about?

Jacqui: The world, general public, people who don't . . .

Rafael/a: The people who are afraid?

Jacqui: Aren't we all?

Rafael/a: Mm mm.

Jacqui: You don't think so?

Rafael/a: No, I think a lot of white people are afraid. I think a lot of people living in like a really Western cultural context are afraid.

Jacqui: Okay, so we're not talking about every culture in the world? We're talking about America. We're talking about white America, generally.

Rafael/a: I need to localize it because when you say people, I mean, shoot, if I just go to Thailand probably all my problems would be taken care of. I could just be whatever I am now, be read as a boy, a really femme-y boy. I could be trafficked though, but you know?

It just really depends on what country you're in, what culture is prevalent, how much has Western culture infiltrated and shifted things or colonized? Because I really feel like gender variance is still very much okay, especially like in Pacific Island cultures here, you know. But in all those places too, there are always going to be people who are afraid, for sure, and mostly because Western and American culture has pretty much touched everywhere, I think at this point almost, and has been received now in some important way and has bearing on people's life, so . . .

Jacqui: Okay, so let's answer the question then: why is a lot of the American population . . .

Rafael/a: Afraid of gender variance? Privilege. It threatens the privilege . . .

Jacqui: Threatens privilege? Okay.

Rafael/a: I mean, if they have had the privilege or maybe the . . . I think it's also simultaneously a privilege and also a form of oppression that they have never been able to experience their gender in any other way. Then they're going to experience someone who's gender variant as threatening or scary, or maybe earth shattering or something.

Usually, when it's something you don't know, I think a really human instinct is to be afraid, which can then come back out as something, who knows what? Violence. And that violence can take form in many ways; it doesn't have to be physical. It's often institutional. Yeah, I feel like usually the fear comes from just not knowing this in themselves but probably some part of them recognizing it and not knowing how to process it, and so yeah, I think often what we get back is just some form of that fear.

11. How do people respond to you?

Jacqui: The question really is saying: if people are having trouble reading your gender, how is it for you interfacing with the world?

Rafael/a: Well, it's changed over time, so I mean at this moment, people usually interact with me just deciding that I am some kind of female to them, some kind of version of woman. I don't know if they're reading me as a trans woman. I'd like to think so. That'd be my greatest compliment. I actually really just kind of want to be read as trans* in this context, because I feel most comfortable as that. And it's probably really not safe, but that's what I like, just being read as Trans*.

Yeah, I usually get “miss” and “lady” and “she” and sometimes if I have the energy I'll correct them or I'll figure out a way to do it without doing it as directly. Sometimes I'll be like—I'll just tell them pronouns I go by or sometimes I'll just say, “Oh no, that's the wrong bathroom key. I need the one for the men's room.”

You know, I'll just do stuff like that, and they get really like, you know, whatever. But I think, *Just give me the goddamn key. It's a single use. Fuck you!*

And at work, sometimes I'll have clients be like: “I can't work with a dude, like I need a female [massage] therapist.” And I'm like, *Whoa that's a trip, 'cause I'm wearing lipstick and earrings and that guy seriously thought . . . I mean thank you, but like . . .*

And then I'll be like, “Oh, but I'm trans. I don't know if that affects things. I don't really identify actually either way; I'm also gender fluid.”

And people are just like “Oh, that doesn't help the situation either.” You know. *Bye.* I just book them with my boss instead, because she's female identified. Mostly I'm having a lot of femme

privilege right now, in general, you know. I get treated more as a pretty girl lately. I don't really dress to pass as a boy as much. Sometimes I have and I mostly just get a lot of confusion of pronouns and that happens 'cause I'm still pretty like . . . I like to be a pretty boy and so it's kind of just . . . yeah, I get a mix of stuff.

Jacqui: Can I ask you a question about testosterone? 'Cause you took it for a while and now you're not. Can you . . . would you be willing to talk about your choice around that?

Rafael/a: Yeah. When I was . . . yeah. Oh, my choice around that?

Jacqui: Like that you chose to stop taking it? Or even the choice to begin when you started taking it?

Rafael/a: I can track the first choice more. I don't know if it was a choice, it was just kind of like . . . I mean it was a choice and it was *this needs to happen*, 'cause again there were bigger things at hand. It's not just me. Yeah, I had access; that was a really big part of it.

Jacqui: Access meaning money, access to medical . . .

Rafael/a: Access being I had health insurance that would cover it. So, it was . . . I wanted masculine traits. I wanted to . . . I still wanted to dress however I was dressing. But I was realizing that I wanted . . . my body shape and things, and certain reads on it to just be shifted. I really just felt like a femme-y boy and it wasn't really coming across. I never would identify as lesbian but I was with that community a lot and I was kind of confused by that. But I wasn't a butch and I was this fairy boy *thingy* that was kind of always floating around.

Trans guys did read me they're like, "Oh, that's a baby trans right there. What are you talking about?" And so, yeah, testosterone was just like . . . I actually was doing a lot of lifting before I got on T 'cause I was like, *You know, I'm going to try to do this naturally, whatever that means. I'm going to just try to see if I can shape my body through lots of discipline and exercise and food.* And it actually was shifting quite a bit. I was binding for a long time and I was dressing . . . I had to dress what most people read as butch because they were still reading me as a girl.

But I really wanted to wear more fitted clothing. And I was starting to but it was just not . . . and so eventually it was just like, *I kind of just want to try T.* It was just this thing that was like: *I need to just do it. I can always stop.* I don't know. I know what the effects of it are—things that are not reversible, things that are, you know, whatever. And so I just decided to move towards it. 'Cause I was like, *Ah, get out of your head, just do it.*

Jacqui: Did you give yourself shots?

Rafael/a: Mm hmm, yeah.

Jacqui: That's very brave. And wasn't that big a deal for you?

Rafael/a: No. I mean, I've grown up . . . my dad was always doing like, you know, had me help him stitch himself up, you know, his hands, his forehead; things like that. He was always . . . he's so Mexican. Oh, my God. He said, "I'll just do it myself." I'm like, "Okay."

You know it was like, "I'm a doctor, I can do this. I can do this." So I was around [that] and I heard lots of stories—he was always telling me stories about work. So I was around medical stuff a lot and then bodies and so . . .

Jacqui: It's still quite a deal to stab a big fat needle in your leg . . . To me it is, but anyway . . . Finnbar gives himself shots and he let us watch one time. Mostly he does it by himself. He's good at it. So how long were you on testosterone?

Rafael/a: Almost five years. I told myself to do a five-year round of it and just see 'cause they're always telling you: "Oh, it takes about five years for a full transition, for things to turn over." And I really saw a lot of shifts but I also didn't see a lot of shifts, in how I was being read and received and presenting. So I thought: *I'm not really helping myself if I want to pass because I'm not dressing [the way people expect] and I don't want to. If anything, I'm exploring dresses more again or tight skirts or all these things.*

Especially after the top surgery, I was like, *Sweet! I get to wear all these things I was trying to wear before but they didn't look right on me 'cause I had boobs and I was really confused.*

So I went back to wearing these super draping, deep-necked things, which made [more] sense [to me] now that I had a flat chest.

Yeah, so I was still being read as either really *andro* [androgynous] or just female and trans girl, so really it's like, *What the hell is this whole T thing for? I don't know. Why don't we just knock it off?*

I also think the deeper pull to get off T was around bleeding. I really wanted to have my cycle back regularly. And it had come back, actually halfway through being on T, and I'm like, *Okay, whatever.* That's not some . . . like some guys are: "Oh, my God, no!"

I've always been fine with it. But actually, not only was I okay with it, I actually connected with it finally. I never had a connection to it before, and so this time I was like, *Oh, my God, you're back,* and like, *What the fuck, this is crazy!*

And I started to learn more about how sacred our blood is, and was just like, *Okay, so this is actually something that, in a lot of different traditions, is a really special time. It's not something to be hated even if it's painful. Actually . . .*

Jacqui: Do you think about having a kid? 'Cause being a doula, I would think that it at least enters your mind periodically . . .

Rafael/a: That was never in my mind for a long time, interestingly, but I think I'm just getting to the age where my clock has just started and I'm like, *Oh, hi!* But that's going to be over there for now.

Jacqui: But I love how you hold all this, right? Yeah.

12. How do you wish people would respond to you around your gender?

Rafael/a: Just with respect.

Jacqui: With respect.

Rafael/a: I would just wish that it wasn't a thing, mostly, but if it is a thing for them, just to be respectful about it and check their language.

Jacqui: If someone wants to know what pronouns you prefer, or how to . . . how do you want someone to inquire about that?

Rafael/a: It's interesting, because you'd think I'd always want them to ask me, just like, "Hey what pronouns do you prefer?" But it's really interesting . . . like I hear energy more than words, so even with a pronoun mess up or a missed pronoun . . .

I always tell people I prefer *he* and *him* probably right now, but anything with love and respect. So I also feel the questions, and if it's with love and respect, however you can best ask in your language, please do if you can.

If you can't, that's fine Ask somebody else maybe, if they know me, or just refrain from "pronouncing" and just try to go by names instead. But also, if there isn't that love and respect, just please don't.

Jacqui: So intention is much more important than actual . . .

Rafael/a: Yeah 'cause you get that question—I mean, I don't think I've ever received a pronoun question in a hateful way, that's for sure. Because usually the hateful thing is: "What are you?" That's the thing, right? And then I'm like, *Okay, what are they asking right now?* I don't know how to come back with and usually I just don't. I just shut that down. So yeah, I think it's the energy.

Jacqui: Do you think it's harder for people with people who aren't really trying to be one side of the binary or the other? Do you think that it's more awkward or harder or more confusing?

Rafael/a: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I don't know. I think it can be because . . . I think it's just as disturbing though. If they read you as someone who has crossed the bridge and you're now something, and they see you as a fraud basically or they see you as sick or deceiving them . . . it's just as disturbing.

But if you're fluid, it's almost like something they make fun of more than to be disturbing or threatening. Because it's like: *Oh, you don't even know—you're a really silly-looking human.* You know? Versus: *Oh, you're not a woman. I can read you.* You know what I mean? It's weird. I feel like it's the same pot of hate though, but it's just different ways of delivering it. I don't know. I think overall it's just disturbing for them. I think what's actually more disturbing though about being more fluid . . . although honestly if you're being read as a trans* person that's a fluidity right there, because that doesn't fit in their binary.

If you're being read as fluid . . . because often I . . . 'cause it just depends too on who's having the reaction, and mostly my reaction is from people I read as cis men. And it's a weird mix of attraction and confusion, at me and at themselves, because the attraction confuses them but then what are you to begin with, right? It's like trying to orient themselves around this new strange thing, this feeling, right? But, what was the question?

Jacqui: How do you wish people would respond to you?

Rafael/a: Oh, right! So the thing I was going to say about people's energy of asking questions and intention. Some people, even [with] that question, "What are you?"—I receive that in [different] ways from all kinds of folks.

Honestly, if it's from a person of color or it's from people of different class and academic background, educational background, it might come off in that [challenging] way, if [they have had] no education around gender.

I feel like the really tactful [way to ask about] pronouns, is from a really educationally white way of approaching me, PC. And if you don't have that it's going to come out to what's being read as raw or rude or all these other racist things.

And for me it's like, *Yeah, that's fine. Ask me however you can.* If I feel you're about to threaten me though, physically, it's a different thing. And a white person with nice language can be threatening physically too, so it all can be the same.

But just because you're not able to ask me nicely doesn't mean I'm not going to level with you and share with you about how I am, because I actually want to be in community with you. But I usually respond with is like, "Why are you asking?" And then we talk about them a little bit, and then I might share maybe, you know . . . So I think it's like no matter how they ask, mostly [what is important to me is] if they can respond with openness to learning about themselves more than me.

13. What are the hardest things you deal with or have dealt with?

Rafael/a: I'm super lucky. I'm super privileged around that. I often choose to just be ignorant of the fact that me dressing like this walking down the street at this time of night or this time of day in this neighborhood is really unsafe. In this part of the country . . . Or another country.

But the things that I'm aware of that have been the harder aspects of gender stuff for me is really just work, you know? Just figuring out how to make a living and [to figure out things] like how to get myself to feel like I can apply for whatever job. Or, if I do apply, how the hell am I going to present?

[I wonder] *how the hell am I going to navigate the interview?* [And] then, *Am I going to keep it up for the whole time if I do get that job?* You know?

So I've been [very] privileged about it. I'm just going to go have whatever I want. Gender is not an issue. I'm just going to treat this whole situation, every situation I have around jobs, as if this world was how I wish it was, which is that gender doesn't matter, or that people are aware of trans* folks and so they if don't get it, I'm not going to educate them.

Because this isn't my job, [unless] they pay me to do it (or I can send them to somebody else). [I am] learning how to be really entitled about being a trans* person sometimes.

Well, you have all those other entitled citizens, non-POC [people of color] folks, getting jobs. Can I just try that on in a different way? I guess that's my privilege from being from a mixed-class background and from having a really good education. This means [I know] how to work the system.

Jacqui: And how well you speak . . .

Rafael/a: Yeah, and knowing how to code switch, you know, it's just . . . it's a lot.

Jacqui: Code switch?

Rafael/a: Yes.

Jacqui: What's that?

Rafael/a: Speaking in a way that makes white folks comfortable.

Jacqui: So depending on whom you're speaking to, you'll change your language?

Rafael/a: Mm hmm. And for me it's around whiteness. That's how I've learned to switch. Yeah, and then professionalism is just "*How white can you be in this space?*" Really it's "*How can you show up?*"

Because, you know, I've been policed so much, like is your jewelry too big? Your colors are a little uh . . . and I can try my . . . I don't really want to try my best to be white for you all. No matter what you put on me, I'm still going to look different, you realize?

Jacqui: Even with pearls on . . . I'm going to look like me.

Rafael/a: Yeah, and I'm still going to, you know . . . I can speak the best, as I've been trained. But my energy's still always going to be me and so it's like *if people can't just vibe with that . . .*

That's what I've learned. It's mostly been around work. I've limited myself in a lot of ways because of how I am [in my] presentation, which means color as well, and how I pass in terms of color and gender.

In my mind I limit myself in terms of the things that I can do for paid work. Or I push myself more into only one area that I can do work. But, yeah, I think in birthwork [supporting pregnant and birthing women] it's definitely better.

[But I ask myself,] *Why do you keep choosing to try to do work in fields where you're just always choosing the wrong gender to put on?*

I started on music way back and classical music was really dominated by white men, and then [I thought about] going into medical work and now massage [therapy], and male therapists are not the . . . no one wants them.

So I don't know, I just feel like I just keep choosing the wrong . . . So it's mostly work I think.

Jacqui: Have you changed your gender marker?

Rafael/a: It's like, not until you guys get more than two gender markers will I change it, 'cause there's no point.

Jacqui: That's good. That's really good.

Rafael/a: I'm really thankful that I'm okay with my name. I go by different versions of it, but legally I'm fine with the name I have. And I've been pretty lucky navigating the medical system too, because of the privilege I've grown up with, and also [because] my dad's a doctor and my sister's a doctor, so I was raised around that. But I am still really young in navigating that system and it's going to be ever evolving, I think for sure.

Jacqui: Hopefully changing too.

14. Do you have a motto or something you say to yourself that helps you get through?

Rafael/a: Through just like the daily . . .

Jacqui: You know, some of the people I've interviewed have just had really, really hard times. And I'm hearing a different story from you. Not that stuff's not hard, 'cause of course it is, but um . . . but you know some people . . .

Rafael/a: Mm hmm.

Jacqui: But like even, you know you talked about being . . . I don't even know if you associate your feeling suicidal to depression.

Rafael/a: That's what they always told me, "Oh, you're depressed." So okay, so what does that mean?

Jacqui: Right, right, but like choosing to stay on the planet? Is there something that helped you?

Rafael/a: I mean my thing that I already said earlier is like, "Don't do the job for them."

Jacqui: Okay.

Rafael/a: And that to me is that: *Your ancestors continued to give life, continued to die and then give life all the way to get you here, and now that you're here, who is still trying to kill you? [Those] who killed your ancestors and their ancestors—they're still trying to kill you. Don't do the job for them.* So that's kind of been like my survival thing, I guess.

Jacqui: Good. Well, that's great. That's good.

15. What helps you get through the tough times?

Rafael/a: Prayer. Different forms of prayer. You know, I grew up next to my grandma's side, most of the time; she's Filipino, you know, super Catholic. I was at Catholic school until I got to college. I'm not Catholic any more. I never was. I just, yeah, learned a lot about it.

Jacqui: Is there a part of Catholicism though, that you . . . I mean if you don't take the whole thing, and just say, "There is something that I got from this . . ."

Rafael/a: Well, yeah, how to pray. My grandma taught me how to pray and to me that just means she taught me how to sit and just, you know, *work hard, create your altars, sacrifice . . .* I mean these are all parts of how your prayers get to where they're going.

But Catholicism, for a lot of cultures that have been masked over by Catholicism, we just took all of our creators and all of our folks underground and replaced them with all these other faces. It's all the same thing though. That's what I learned later.

Jacqui: I have a friend of mine—he was in South America and came back and said, "You don't have to scratch Catholicism very deep to feel the old religion underneath."

Rafael/a: Yeah, totally.

Jacqui: So if you pray, I mean this is very personal so don't answer if it's not comfortable, but do you have a sense of whom or what you're praying to?

Rafael/a: I think when I pray it means that I'm speaking with my ancestors, ones that are usually more recent and then ones that aren't so recent. And then also, I guess there's a sense of there's some way for creators that are around, you know.

Jacqui: Creator spirits?

Rafael/a: Mm hmm. But I think it's generally having some kind of faith . . . I think it takes a lot of faith to even pray because you're somehow surrendering to this idea that your prayer is being heard somewhere or is reaching somewhere, and to take the time to do that is—you're believing that something is holding it.

But I also see it as putting an energy out, and that energy can shift so many things. And I just feel like we're actually really, really powerful creatures and I don't know that we spend enough time cultivating the power of . . . just prayer, I guess.

Jacqui: But you also said sitting, like taking that time to not just be . . . watching television, or something.

Rafael/a: I don't sit enough though, I really don't. But I pray through dancing, I pray through making offerings. I pray in a lot of different ways, I guess. I pray through making love, you know, like I pray through loving myself.

So, I don't know. I guess prayer gets me through the hard times, and writing [does, too]. I used to write a lot more. That's actually how I fell in love with myself was through my poetry, but I haven't really been cultivating that connection in a long time. But when I'm really in it I'm like, okay, so eventually [I] just kind of get to writing because I don't know what else to do right now.

Jacqui: Wonderful, what a wonderful way to phrase that—*fell in love with myself*. That's really wonderful. I mean, to me, and again I don't mean to be too personal but this is so personal. The whole idea of choosing to stay on the planet, and coming to loving yourself—they've got to be related. And I . . . as I'm sitting here I'm just really thankful that you're still here.

Rafael/a: Thank you.

16. Is there anything you'd like to say to gender-variant people or people who wonder if they are? Is there anything you'd like to say to everyone?

Rafael/a: I guess I'll split [the question] for gender-variant folks and questioning folks. Yeah, kind of a similar thing, it's like I'm happy they're here. I'm happy that they're able to listen to the "something." I mean for me it's the ancestors.

And like when I said I fall in love with myself, it's really falling in love with yourself which encompasses so many [people] you know.

So I'm happy to hear and I'm happy that their ancestors have their back in some way for them to still be alive here. And if they choose to leave sooner, you know, my blessings, and that they [may] return in another way. Because there's also nothing wrong with leaving sooner, I think, too.

But I guess for questioning folks, too: I'm happy that they're questioning and I just pray for their protection and their safety at that time, and same for those that are no longer questioning and are already in that. But you know, questioning is such a fragile place and I just pray that they have the support they need in whatever way.

And you know, I feel like it's obvious, but it's more than okay to question, you know, and no one needs to give you permission to question, but if you need the permission, give it to yourself. You know: *do it*.

But also I pray that they'll be given space throughout their life to question it openly, you know, because there's so many of us that don't have the privileges that I've had, you know, so far, and they can't dress however they want or be however they want. Because our life depends on it.

[And to the general public]: Before you take the time to hate someone else, please take the time to love yourself first. There're some folks who are haters who really love themselves, probably. If you're going to love yourself—if you've really spent any time sitting with all the complexity of being human—then you don't have time to hate people, to just cause harm.

This is what I hope [for], to understanding [our] interdependence with these people. It's hard though—I've still got a lot of hate and rage, you know. So I don't know . . . it's interesting. I don't think I'm speaking to everyone. I'm speaking to the haters right now. That's interesting. I'm almost just like: "Haters, that's okay, I don't hate you." Just like, you know, "Be gentle with us, please. Take a break from hating." But for everyone, I don't know.

Jacqui: That's good though. That's great.

17. What's unique about you?

Rafael/a: What's unique about me? Well, I'll never be again. Like this whole culmination of physical, spatial, all kinds of time and place things that come into what you see and hear and feel right now? That's never going to happen again. That's unique.

Jacqui: It is unique.

Rafael/a: Yeah, that's all I can really say. Because I don't really think any of us are that . . . I feel like we're all just new patterns of old things rearranged. Do you know what I mean? Like, we're just . . . nothing is ever created or destroyed—I really do feel that. And so . . .

They just keep coming together to make a new thing and then that poofs into another thing . . . poof! And we might be doing it all in this lifetime and then still beyond it, right? So . . .

Jacqui: Okay. The transition in you from *I didn't know I loved myself* to *I get it that I do love myself* is partly appreciating the uniqueness of you. The manifestation of you that's now on the planet is you, you know? And I guess, the celebration of that, you know?

Rafael/a: Yeah.

18. What are a few of your favorite books or movies?

Rafael/a: My favorite books or movies? I really like Octavia Butler books. Do you know Octavia Butler?

Jacqui: No, I don't. What kind of books?

Rafael/a: She's been categorized in sci-fi and fantasy. God, that's such a typical trans* answer. How many of us are into sci-fi and fantasy? You wonder why? She uses sci-fi or fantasy to educate . . . to destroy and create and help us remember and all these things about just . . . I don't know, humans, but a lot of commentary around color and gender. And she's, I mean, she's a black, lesbian, sci-fi writer. She's now passed. May their soul rest in peace and power.

Jacqui: Oh, I'll read her.

Rafael/a: She lived in Seattle and . . .

Jacqui: She wrote a bunch of books?

Rafael/a: Yeah, she wrote a lot.

Jacqui: Any other books, movies?

Rafael/a: Well then, Crystos is a really favorite poet of mine. I read a lot of poetry—I used to read a lot more. Of course, Audre Lorde's poetry. Yeah. Movies, you said?

I've been really . . . it's funny. I haven't really liked a movie in a long time enough to like, *Ah that's my favorite movie*. I have to think—I have to go back to when I used to watch more movies.

Jacqui: Think about it. It'll pop up. How about when you were a little kid?

Rafael/a: I read a lot. I was always reading. I read a lot of folktales and a lot of stories from the South, just like old . . . I mean it's . . . yeah, it's kind of interesting, the things I used to read.

Jacqui: Like a folk . . . give me a folktale. Anything that's . . .

Rafael/a: Well, there was this book—the title’s so cheesy—it’s called *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl*. And it was this young black girl in the South and she . . . yeah, she just—it was like this fantasy book that kind of put together all these old folktales of the South.

19. What are a few of your favorite pieces of music?

Jacqui: What . . . you used to play an instrument or still do?

Rafael/a: Yeah.

Jacqui: Tuba?

Rafael/a: No. I started on piano ’cause my mom was living her dream through me, and I played piano for a very long time. And I already grew up on classical music basically, like every good Asian kid. Don’t say that . . . And then . . .

So [then] I got into singing, which was the last thing I ever thought I would do, and somehow really liked it. I got thrown into a vocal class in high school as a requirement—I didn’t want to do it—and started to kind of like it and then eventually the teacher was like, “I want to have you as a private student.” And I ended up—that’s what I majored in in undergrad was opera. So that’s what I did.

Jacqui: So what’s the look? You don’t like opera?

Rafael/a: No. I love to sing. I don’t like opera. I don’t know why we’re still replicating those racist and misogynous tales. Some of the music is very beautiful, but yeah . . . I can’t give my body to this work, you know? But I’m really happy with what it taught me and I really hope to actually figure out how the heck to get into using my voice again. Because that’s actually when I started to connect to my body a little more, because I connected to my breath. So . . . that’s life.

Rafael/a: So for music, I like Beyoncé’s new album right now. That’s my favorite thing right now.

20. What’s the best thing about being transgender?

Rafael/a: Freedom! I mean, being Trans* here in the States . . . I hear about just our queer folks—not even just Trans* folks—in the rest of the world . . . and I can’t help but just think about that. It’s just so much more interesting [to be transgender,] too.

Jacqui: Freedom.

Rafael/a: Yeah.

Jacqui: Freedom to be who you are.

Rafael/a: It's just the thing that came to mind. Just freedom, because I don't have illusions of how I'm supposed to be or who I am, in terms of gender.

Jacqui: And it spreads beyond gender?

Rafael/a: Yeah. And I mean that's not to say it's not hard of course, all the trip ups, but yeah. And the last thing is just being able to shift, and anyone can though, that's the thing. It's not specific to *trans**. That's why it's kind of weird saying it.

I think the best thing is just—and, but this isn't specific to *trans** people either—but just having ancestry of two-spirit people, you know? But I think all of us probably do so, but being able to connect with them, I guess? And having the desire to connect with them because I carry that in this body. So, I think that's probably the best part to me.

Jacqui: Sounds good to me.

21. What do you wish I would ask you that I left out?

Rafael/a: Question you haven't asked me?

Jacqui: Or anything you want to talk about that didn't get prompted by me.

Rafael/a: Um . . . I guess something about how transitioning has affected relationships around you, and it's not just with your family, right? Or like maybe, *what would you offer to trans* folks that are going through transition or gender-variant folks who are coming into themselves more?* What would I offer to them around all the other transitions of relationships that will happen around them?

'Cause so often I have seen, you know, a lot of friends and gender-variant folks lose loved ones in a lot of different ways, but romantically too, and also friends and then all the in-betweens of that, right? Intimate relationships, basically. Just how they've shifted away or closer or . . . and it's hard either way.

So, yeah, a lot of relationships don't survive the many transitions in our life, right? I feel like we're always often portrayed as um . . . well, at least in the past—I hope it's changing now—but with *trans** people especially, being portrayed as loveless, you know, and never being able to find people to love them or that they can love romantically, and it's just not true.

And yet I think I still often operate under that, too, in a lot of ways, even though I'm partnered in different ways and have intimate relationships that make me happy, and those have happened since transitioning physically as well, however many times I have. But you kind of . . . there's always still kind of internalized transphobia just like, *Who actually can handle this?* Or . . .

Jacqui: Are you talking about personal internalized transphobia?

Rafael/a: Mm hmm. Yeah.

Jacqui: Interesting. Okay. Like it's a form of self-hate, really.

Rafael/a: Yeah, basically. It's just one of the many ways, whether it's just physically being like, *Who's going to love you or be attracted?* [or you] feel like you're not going to meet people who are secure enough in themselves to be okay with being in love with a trans* person. Because I think a lot of folks who have not loved with trans* folks can get really confused or triggered by it or just . . . yeah, just a lot of harm can be created sometimes. And that's romantically and otherwise . . .

So, I think, I mean you express as a parent, like trying to learn how to not change your child but to love them—just learn how to love them better, in different ways. It's the same thing in romantic relationships too, especially if you were together before a transition right?

So [it's important to just learn] how to love, to continue to love this person. And maybe you don't . . . That was definitely a thing for me with my partner before I transitioned the first time. We were wondering, *Oh, will we still be attracted to each other and even just hormonally like what's going to happen? Our pheromones are going to change, you know?*

So I'm like, I don't know. I won't hate you if you're not attracted to me anymore. Those are real things, you know? What I hope is that we all can create networks outside of these relationships that can hold it enough so that when people have to shift how they're in relationship with each other, it's gentle. It's whatever it needs to be.