

## **Maya Williams**

Daisy Pelletier: The date is November 19th, 2021. We're at the Glickman library in Portland, Maine. My name is Daisy Pelletier. D A I S Y P E L L E I T E R. Could you say your name and spelling, please?

Maya Williams: My name is Maya Williams. M A Y A W I L L I A M S.

DP: Thank you. This is a reminder that you can refuse to answer any question and can end the interview at any point. If after 90 minutes the interview needs more time, we can end the interview and schedule a follow-up interview in the spring or fall. So a few basics to get started. How old are you?

MW: Twenty-five.

DP: What are your pronouns?

MW: Ey/em, They/them, she/her pronouns

DP: Okay. Are you from Maine?

MW: I've lived in Maine for four years now.

DP: And what brought you to Maine?

MW: Grad school.

DP: Where are you from? Originally?

MW: North Carolina.

DP: Your identity as a black Christian is important to you. What are the roots of your faith?

MW: The roots of my faith have a lot to do with who my family is being brought up by a Baptist father and a non-denominational mother.

DP: Have you experienced any differences between life in Maine and elsewhere in terms of your faith and the way faith is expressed in the community?

MW: Yeah, it was very intriguing, moving from a place where there were churches on every corner and there was more racial diversity. And then moving to a state that, although there are churches prevalent and Christian privilege is still present, the majority of people I've been in contact with, identified as non-religious. And the majority of the people in the state are white.

DP: What role have interfaith organizations like Chime and the BTS Center played in your life?

MW: Yeah, they played a huge role in regards to giving me a space to express the intersections of poetry and faith, as well as informing what integrating faith and social justice looks like.

DP: Was it hard for you to make the transition from a very religious area into Maine?

MW: Yes. Yeah. Yes, I did find it difficult to find a house of worship here in Maine and difficult to find other fellow Christians in Maine. And they and they exist. But yeah.

DP: Did being black play a part in making it more difficult for you to find a place to workshop?

MW: I will not answer that.

DP: That's fine. In the background that you provided, you mentioned the 2015 Charleston church shooting, would you like to talk about that a little bit.

MW: Yeah. So in 2015, Dylann Roof, who was a Nazi white supremacist, under the guise of wanting a place to pray, you had black church members saying, like, "Oh, yeah, come and worship with us" and used that as an opportunity to murder them. And when it comes to a lot on social justice movements, we tend to forget how black Christianity tends to be stemmed in that, whether it be the civil rights movement, whether it be slave abolition, and, and religion cannot be erased from the black experience. And this is not to say that the majority of the black population is Christian because that's not true. The majority of the black population is Muslim.

But it just took a lot out of people as far as, like even in the safest spaces, those could get harmed. And how do we make sure to keep those spaces safe?

DP: So Charleston was, were you living in...

MW: I was not.

DP: What does gender identity mean to you?

MW: It's something that's a part of me. It's something that brings me joy. It's something that provides me a lot of questions about myself and the world around me.

DP: You're a black Christian, queer, trans person. How do these different social identities coexist and interact within you?

MW: Because I am who I am. I cannot separate one from the other, even though many people have tried to. I can't separate them. They're very integral to how I process each identity.

DP: Did you realize from a young age that you were queer and trans or did that realization commercially for you come more slowly to you?

MW: It came more slowly.

DP: When did you first come out as queer?

MW: 2018

DP: Who did you come out to?

MW: I initially came out at my workplace at Equality Maine along with many other friends. Then, I did not post on social media about it, letting my family know until a few months later.

DP: Was it difficult for you?

MW: Yeah.

DP: Did you come out as trans at the same time you came out as queer or was the same time?

MW: Came out at the same time.

DP: What reactions did you get? Would you like to talk about that?

MW: I will not answer that.

DP: Do you find yourself having to come out repeatedly?

MW: Yes.

DP: Why is it important to come out?

MW: It depends on who you talk to. So, I will not answer that question.

DP: Have you fallen in love before?

MW: Yeah.

DP: When did you first fall in love?

MW: I will not answer that question.

DP: Are you currently in a relationship?

MW: I am.

DP: Would you like to talk about that to me?

MW: I have a very loving partner named Jonathan. We've been together three years now.

DP: Has being trans affected your love life?

MW: My personal love life with my current partner, no. As far as external views of our relationship outside looking in, yes, or like in previous dating excursions? Yes.

DP: Has being a black person had any effect on your love and sex life?

MW: I mean, yes.

DP: Would you like to talk about them?

MW: It's very interesting how there were some dating apps that I felt were safer in regards to gender identity and queerness versus dating apps that are safer in regards to my racial identity. Because yeah, there are dating profiles that talk about how they would not want to date outside of their race. And given that I live in Maine, the most of the options, not all, but most of the options were dating outside of my race, I was like, well (chuckles quietly).

DP: Okay, let's change directions a little bit. Please tell me about your experience in political activism and organizing.

MW: I will not answer that question.

DP: You're a member of Maine Trans Net, an organization that works to help trans people in Maine. Do you want me a little bit about what you do with them?

MW: Yeah. I work specifically through community care programming. So that's involved in a lot of a lot of providing peer support groups for transgender survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence, as well as supporting incarcerated and formerly incarcerated trans folks, as well as providing education to mental health professional and advocates in the state of Maine and on trauma-informed care for transgender survivors, as well as arts programming in Community programming.

DP: So then in your work you were very closely involved in the legislation that was going on this year, I'm assuming in Maine around limiting trans women's access to the emergency shelter? Would you like to talk about that bill and how it affected you and others?

MW: Yeah, it's very interesting because it certainly irritated me as a trans survivor, especially as a trans survivor who was not out at the time and calling certain hotlines that were not very competent. And therefore, like I like to joke with people about how I signed up for the job that I have now out of spite. At the same time I recognize that that's not the same as what my boss, Quinn Gormley had to go through or what a lot of trans women, AMAB, non-binary people had to go through during that time. And how a lot of the press around legislation in May was around the sports bill that it's like, yes, the sports bills are important. And. We really need to make sure trans women have safety and access because they're the least protected.

DP: And also at the same time, there was also a bill being pushed forward and that did get passed to provide some extra protection to trans people who are incarcerated?

MW: Yeah.

DP: And since you work with formerly incarcerated people and I'm assuming that that also was very important to you.

MW: Yes, it was very important. But, Quinn Gormley really spear headed it though. So you really need to reach out to her as far as the writing of the bill. And, and it's very interesting how like when it comes to working with incarcerated or formerly incarcerated trans people, it wasn't until that bill came out that people started to take us more seriously as far as like we want to provide care for trans folks who are incarcerated and we've always provided, provided that care, but now we get to be more vocal about it because of that legislation that passed.

DP: So the legislation helped MainTransNet in the mission to provide that care?

MW: Yeah.

DP: Have you ever felt unsafe as a trans person?

MW: Yes.

DP: Would you like to talk about circumstances that might make you feel unsafe?

MW: Such as like this, this idea around like, oh, is it work, do I have the energy and capacity to come out in this moment, if someone were to misgender, me or like or like, am I going to be triggered in this space by anything that's, that's not said well or or am I or am I going to be harassed? And again, I want to name that the things that I go through are certainly not as extensive as, as other trans folks because I know that I do have quote, Passing unquote privilege as far as like cisgender passing privilege. But at the same, I am a black trans person and that has its own things that I won't expand upon too much.

DP: So in your background materials, you mentioned the organization Speak About It. Can you tell me about Speak About It?

MW: Yeah, they are a theater and consent education non-profit.

DP: How did you get involved in the program?

MW: I auditioned for their summer tour in 2019. Yeah.

DP: So they've just they've been running for 11 years and they were founded by Shane Diamond and trans man. Does it feel significant to you such an important program was founded by a trans person?

MW: Oh, yeah, absolutely. And it speaks volumes to how LGBTQ+ inclusive their consent education is.

DP: Are there any trans specific issues related to consent that are used in the work that they do?

MW: Only because that's the larger conversation that I'm unable to do justice, I'm going to skip that question.

DP: Okay. Yeah, that's fine. And you mentioned the Maine Electronic Center and the fact that it's now closed. What role did the center having your own development as an artist? (I mislabeled this organization. It was the Maine Center for Electronic Music.)

MW: I mean, it was a great, safe space for black and brown artists in Maine, so the fact that, that, that's gone, it's just, it's just heartbreaking to see a gym there. Now when more black and brown folks could have been still using that space and looking at black and brown visual art and coming together, listening to folks rap or play music.

DP: Can you describe a little bit about what it was like to go to the, what they did, what was available, what they did there?

MW: Yeah, Derek Jackson really held that space so well. And he deserves more credit where credit is due.

DP: How has its closing impacted you and other queer artists of color in Maine.

MW: I'm going to skip that question. Yeah.

DP: You indicated that chosen family is important to you. How do you define chosen family?

MW: Chosen family is any family that may be outside of, outside of your given family that you feel safe around, that you feel you can express your whole self. And that it's not conditional. Sometimes as, as queer and trans people, there's a lot of conditional love and our given families around, oh, I love you, but I just don't like your quote lifestyle end quote. Whereas in chosen family, it's like, I love you, period.

DP: And what have you been able to create chosen family in Maine?

MW: I have. Yeah, it's been a real blessing to do that, to be surrounded by black and brown people, queer and trans people, queer and trans people of color in Maine. And to just be, and just learn how to be vulnerable and transparent because of that community. For sure.

DP: What made it easy for you or hard for you to find that chosen family?

MW: Yeah. When I first moved to Maine, it was really hard to find them. At first, I was doing field a internship with Maine Inside Out, at the time when I first moved here. And I did not run into any black people outside of the program that I was in. So it was very upsetting to only find black and brown people who were incarcerated or formerly incarcerated. And then every a few weeks finally being able to get involved more and more and opening that and felt really good. And I love telling the story about how I went to Space Gallery for a showing they were doing of the documentary "Whose Streets" which it, which was about the activism after the death of Michael Brown. And and it was there where where I was like, "oh my god, there's an influx of black folks, this is amazing!" I got to talk to so many people I still talk to you now from that night.

DP: So, you mentioned Maine Inside Out, which is a program to help incarcerated youth is that right? And as they also, as they transition out of incarceration, can you tell me a little bit about Maine Inside Out?

MW: Yeah, they use theater and art as a way to engage with incarcerated and formally incarcerated youth.

DP: And that program was started by a formerly incarcerated man, is that right?

MW: This was actually co-founded by three women who were, who were active. And then, and then they, and then Joseph Jackson was able to join their staff. And then a few more folks had joined their staff as well. So so now it's mix of people with and without that experience now.

DP: Have you stayed involved, are in touch with that since you've moved on?

MW: Yes. Yeah. I'm actually working with them now on a project where, where I'll be interviewing a few poets in their program and commission them to write a poem about mental health and incarceration.

DP: Continuing to talk about poetry you're a poet. When did you first start to see yourself that way?

MW: Very young age.

DP: Is poetry the only form of art and theatre?

MW: Yeah. Poetry, written poetry, performance, written poetry, theater, essays, acting in film and stage.

DP: What are some of the most important things that have contributed to your sense of yourself as a poet?

MW: This need for honesty and community.

DP: So, have you been able to form community around your poetry?

MW: I have, yes. I host a weekly open mic called Port Veritas that who, then they've actually been around since 2003, I believe. So, it's amazing that like, because I got involved with them only like four years ago, they're still like, oh, you're good at holding the space" and then I'm grateful for that.

DP: What does it mean to you to be the host for that?

MW: This wanting it to be as safe space as possible for others as well as myself.

DP: What subjects feature most prominently in your poetry?

MW: Mostly suicidality a lot of the times and racial identity and mental health, family and faith.

DP: Do you find poetry to be an outlet?

MW: I do.

DP: What does, was it a surprise to be appointed to Poet Laureate of Portland this year?

MW: It was not a surprise that I got selected. It was a surprise that I, that, that I ended up getting nominated. Because of how often the poet laureate is, not, not all of them, but a good portion of them were, were, were, were middle age. All of them were white. So so that was So it was a big deal to be selected as like the youngest and the only black person, the only trans person. And, and it felt, it felt good, I wanted very badly. So very grateful.

DP: What does it entail to be the Poet Laureate?

MW: It entails not only going to different readings, but also formulating any literary or artistic programming in collaboration with the Portland Public Library. So, really excited for the next three years of that programming.

DP: So is that a three-year stint then?

MW: mmhmm

DP: And you'll work closely then with the Portland Public Library. Do you think that you're in Maine to stay?

MW: I am, yeah.

DP: Do you have anything else that you want specifically that you want to talk about?

MW: Are there any follow-up questions you have?

DP: I'm going to go back here and check on the things. Can you talk a little bit more about CHIME and the BTS center, and or what they do?

MW: So CHIME is a chaplaincy program in Maine. And so they so they worked with folks who want to essentially use faith and or spirituality to provide support, whether that be in hospitals, whether that be in palliative care, whether that be in community oriented care. And the BTS center, they... So many years ago it was originally the Bangor Theological Seminary. But then, but then a lot of time had passed and then they wanted to use those roots of the seminary, but wanting to focus more so on, on how faith or spirituality influences the push for, for combating climate change.

DP: So their focus right now is climate change?

MW: mmhmm

DP: All right, is chaplaincy, something that you're interested in?

MW: That's a good question. I am intrigued by movement chaplaincy, which is a form of chaplaincy within social justice movements and community. I don't know. We'll see. I do enjoy interfaith programming, so and I remember my creative partner, Mia Willis had said to me like you should consider chaplaincy. And I enjoy working with them on our, on our video series called Dying Laughing. That's a live action and animation discussion series that talks about the representation of suicide in entertainment media. And we were able to make it an interfaith product as well because they are a Buddhist, they are a Zen Buddhist and I'm a nondenominational Christian.

DP: Can you tell me a little bit more about Dying Laughing?

MW: Yeah. So each episode, it's either need me, Mia, or the both of us picking a picking an episode of a TV show or a film and, and talk about a specific topic as it intersects with suicide. So for example, we recently, reviewed the film Christine, and we call the episode, Don't Die Laughing On Air with Christine. And because it's a film that was made in 2016 that is based on that's based on Christine Chubbuck, who in 1974, she was a journalist, and she did the first televised suicide in history. And then we have a lot to unpack about that.

DP: Absolutely. Can you talk about any positive reactions to your coming out?

MW: Yeah. My brother was the first person to call me after I made the Facebook posts, which was a surprise to me. He was very kind and he said he was proud of me and that was very sweet.

DP: Or is he older?

MW: He is my youngest brother.

DP: In what circumstances? Are there circumstances where you don't feel safe coming out to people?

MW: I'm not going to answer that.

DP: That's fine. Can you tell me a little bit more? You told me quite a lot about what you do for Maine Trans Net and with your community care programming, which is what you do. You talk to advocates and unless you mean therapists and things of this nature, what is it that you're doing when you're talking to them or informing them about things or what is it that you're doing?

MW: Yeah. So I do a lot of education around like the basic terminology you should know. And here's the type of transitions a trans person goes through. So it says not just limited to medical transition, it's not that every trans person wants that. There's also social transition, legal transition, personal transition, relational. Then we talk about intersectionality when it comes to trans identity. And then we share a lot of a lot of stats from our community survey that we did. So we share statistics that are very specific to Maine when it comes to trans people's struggle with homelessness or mental health or access to health care. Self, self-esteem, identity, dysphoria, trauma-informed care we talk about a lot.

DP: The city that I live in has a shelter for homeless youth, and I know that a lot of homeless youth are LGBT.

MW: Yes.

DP: Does Maine Trans Net deal with that a lot?

MW: Yes.

DP: Is that something that you have that you deal with as far as working with organizations?

MW: Like we talk about that in our trainings and we receive referrals from advocates who have been like, "I want to make sure they're in a safe place. I don't wanna put them in the, in the wrong place or I don't want them to feel uncomfortable in a space," or we've received a couple of calls or where are they were in a homeless shelter and need transfers. And now what do we do?

DP: The legislations, this that they were trying to pass this year would have made that easier for shelters to do. Are there protections currently in place as part of the law to protect trans people as far as shelters is concerned?

MW: So within the Maine Human Rights Act, there are protections there with the exception of private institutions. And, and what was so interesting while that while the bill that did not pass, was trying to pass, folks are like, well, I mean, like there's still the Maine Human Rights Act. So basically don't even look at this legislation and then it's like, no, we still have to look at the legislation that because we're really trying to expand that beyond the Maine Human Rights Act.

DP: Because not part of the mean Constitution, right? So any legislation could overwrite it at the time.

MW: mhm What time is it right now?

DP: 4:30. So, expressing your whole self, is that something that you have a hard time doing or do you need a safe space to do it, or is it to something that you've come to over time?

MW: I think it really depends on the context. It depends on how safe I feel and the space or like, I've, I've been able to grow in confidence because of the work that I engage in, whether it's with Maine Trans Net and my poetry work my artwork, cause it's, because I found that like the more specific you are in your poetry, the more people will resonate with that. And really wanting to connect with people. And in order to connect with people, I need to be honest about myself first. And that, and that encourages other people to be as honest as they are comfortable with, and whenever they're ready. Yeah.

DP: That's you said that the more specific you are with your poetry, the more people resonate with it. And earlier you also said that the need for honesty is very important in poetry. Have you made a lot of connections through your poetry?

MW: I have.

DP: Can you tell me a little bit about how you've gone about making those connections.

MW: Yeah. I've been able to work with the Maine Youth Action Network to talk more with youth and connect with youth. And, and it's great that I'm still in contact with people I, I used to work with, such as Maine Inside Out or folks like that. It's been, it's been really good to use that as a connecting factor, like not only with like, "hey, can you read at this event?" or the like, "hey, can you facilitate this workshop?" It's been like, "Can we get coffee?" And it's like, yeah, sure!

DP: And your work with the Portland Public Library will increase that your exposure to young people and older people as well, I assume.

MW: Yeah, we're starting 2022 with a six month workshop series, we are really excited about.

DP: You want to tell me a little bit about that?

MW: Yeah. Each month is dedicated to a different co-facilitator or set of co-facilitators and I, talking about the intersection of poetry with another artistic field or with a specific identity. And during the first month, it'll all be online. As long as COVID stays somewhat controlled as possible, it'll be a hybrid thing, where it's in person and online, but in the meantime, we're online. And we'll also have justice involved youth participating, which is exciting.

DP: So, what is justice involved youth? Is that a specific program or organization?

MW: Off the record?

DP: Do you want me to pause it?

MW: Yeah, pause it.

[The recording is paused here so that Maya and Daisy can briefly discuss justice involved youth.]

MW: So, yeah!

DP: Okay. You want to tell me a little bit about the Maine Youth Action Network?

MW: Yeah! They are a statewide organization that works a lot with high school youth. And they actually have young people facilitating programs and workshops as well. And they collaborate with other organizations that work with young people. Very lovely.

DP: All right. You mentioned the Space Gallery. Where is that located?

MW: It's located on Congress Street downtown, not too far from the Art District's parking garage.

DP: And do they often host things that are related to activism?

MW: Yeah, they host things that are, that are an intersection between art and activism or like visual art pieces or they do films, theories and concerts. They did that and that recently about theory section, the poetry and community activism featured us that Signature Mimi, Sam Spadafore, and Samaa Abdurraqib that was, that was great.

DP: Going back to the Maine Electronic Music Center. What is something that you did there? Did you participate in anything there?

MW: I was got to be as involved as I could in community. There was certainly a lot more people that more involved than I was. Then. Yeah. They just need to be acknowledged for their work.

DP: Yeah. And are you still working with Speak About It?

MW: From time to time.

DP: Can you tell me a little bit more about what they actually do? Do they go to high schools? Do they?

MW: Yup, they go to high schools and colleges. So in the summertime ,they do an extensive tour where they perform at colleges, an entire written, full-length play about consent, using different examples of it, and specific terminology around consent and sexual assault. And they also do workshops online and in person when it's not during summer college orientation stuff. So they were around year round. But I know they tend to be around during Sexual Assault Awareness Month and and college orientation time.

DP: And how did you get involved with them, or, you told me you applied. You tried out for it.

MW: Yes.

DP: And how did you get involved with Maine Inside Out?

MW: Through grad school site for the University of New England's Applied Arts and Social Justice Program in relation to the Masters in Social Work study. And it's a requirement to choose an art-based non-profit as your field placement. And I and that's what I really loved about that, attracted me to it. So then I chose Maine Inside Out because of the integration of theater and activism and community work.

DP: Were you involved in incarceration activism at all before Maine Inside Out?

MW: That's a good question. Not not really. So, so it's amazing how much Maine has opened me more to that. It's incredible. Thank you for that. That's a good question. What time is that I asked because I have something at five and I need to use the restroom.

DP: Do you do you want to pause this so you can go to the bathroom before you read the poem or do you anything you want to add? Because I don't have anything else if you. If you have anything else that you want to add that I didn't ask...

MW: Oh, there's the poem that wanted me to read! (general laughter) That's right. That's a thing. Let me read that. I'm going to read this poem about, about trans friendship. And I actually, I did this training at MECA [Maine College of Art and Design] recently. And because they had included in my bio about my poetry work along with the educational stuff I was going to be doing for Trans Day of Remembrance, that was the first train I did where I read a poem at the end of it. And this is the poem I read.

And this is after the poet Shay Alexi. So that basically means that I was inspired by Georgia based poet Shay Alexi.

Oh, love that is love but not lover.

With your grin shining through a needed FaceTime or Zoom call

If I can't see your teeth through your mask, I can still see your dimples sparkle.

Oh, dear love that is love, but not Lover.

You're a bubblegum pink lipstick looks so swell on you.

Your recent haircut gives you the delicious gender euphoria that you've been craving

That delectable pose, Instagram does not deserve

My love, who is love though not lover,

This side of the street smells like firecrackers and pee.

And we still laugh under the Aqua Marine sky on the walk home.

A hug in front of my front door could be better than "text me when you get home."

The latter is still a necessary love language. I promise.

Hey, love though not lover.

Thank you for letting me borrow your mustard yellow top so I can look and feel good today.

Thank you for holding space for my grief too large to fit in any time limited suitcase.

Thank you for being my friend.

DP: Beautiful.

MW: Thank you.

DP: And thank you so much for sharing your life with us.

MW: Thank you for having me. Thank you for reaching out to me.