

## Transcript of Interview with Zola Zakiya Bruce by Kit Heintzman

**Interviewee:** Zola Zakiya Bruce

**Interviewer:** Kit Heintzman

**Date:** 10/12/2022

**Location (Interviewee):** New York, New York

**Location (Interviewer):**

**Transcribed By:** Angelica S Ramos

### **Some of the things we discussed include:**

The importance of participatory research; sex workers as researchers, rather than the object of research. Living without shame. Being an activist; entering the field of bdsm sex work while living in Germany. Having moved back to the USA from Europe 2 years before the start of the pandemic; itching to leave. Comparisons between socialized healthcare in Europe and forprofit healthcare in the USA. Residing in New York City but visiting family in Nashville when the pandemic hit; population density and safety. Being separated from a partner, who was in the Dominican Republic when the pandemic hit; staying connected long distance. Teaching self defense before the pandemic. Teaching about consent. Collecting unemployment; trying for weeks to get ahold of anyone and waiting on hold for hours. Changing careers during the pandemic, becoming the Director of Communications for Sex Workers Project. Financial barriers to education in the USA. Insurance and “free” covid tests. Nonmonogamy during a pandemic, safety boundaries. The continued stigma of associating monkeypox with queer people and sex workers; identity based vaccine access. Marginalized people being hit the hardest by the pandemic. Catching COVID, paxlovid. The overlap of trans\* asylum seekers and sex worker populations. Creating a documentary about sex workers as healers, Sex(ual) Healing (2021). The pandemic disconnecting people from their bodies. The difficulties of organizing sex parties as things open up, COVID safety measures. Looking forward to moving away from the USA, family planning for a future in the Dominican Republic.

**Kit Heintzman 00:02**

Hello, would you please state your name, the date, the time and your location?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce 00:08**

Yes, my name is Zola Zakiya Bruce, my pronouns are they them. The date is October 12. And the time is 1:34. I'm in New York City, actually, specifically at the sex workers project office space, which is at 40 Rector Street.

**Kit Heintzman 00:28**

And the year is 2022.

**Zola Zakiya Bruce 00:30**

And the year is 2022, yes.

**Kit Heintzman 00:33**

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under a Creative Commons license attribution noncommercial sharealike?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 00:42

Yes.

**Kit Heintzman** 00:44

Thank you so much for being here. Would you just start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening? What would you want them to know about you and the place you're speaking from?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 00:54

So, my name again is Zola Bruce, I actually am someone who identifies as an artist, social worker, activist, sex worker, and all around, I feel like I am an existential traveler. So one thing that I would like people to know about me off the bat is, I'm a person that has traveled to over 20 countries. I have lived outside the states for seven of those the for seven years. Specifically in Europe, I was in Amsterdam, and then Berlin. And that's where I actually did migrant sex work myself. And when I say sex work, it's there as an industry of sex work. So I learned even more about that, as I was able to expand my ideas around sex and sexuality. While living in Europe, I started to do BDSM work, because I learned more about it through other practitioners there. And initially, it was a play party, that I really learned more about bondage discipline sadis, sadism, mas, masochism. And that is the I wanted to give you the acronym for BDSM. When I was there, I was open to it, but didn't know as much about it. And then as I did it, I really got into specifically spanking with tools, and also bondage with chain. And those are just things I was naturally into. But people started to pay me for because I'm so good at it. And then I was like, Oh, this is what sex work is like when you learn a skill that people like, and they want to pay for it. And I didn't really know that that's how you like one way you can get into the industry. But because that happens so seamlessly, I was like, I feel so great doing this, because it's another aspect of myself that I was never able to explore in the States. And mostly because of feeling like while I was living in the States was very repressive. Even when I was doing burlesque because I am, I was a burlesque dancer, also, when I was here in the States as something I just love to do. Because it was also doing youth development work. They definitely said that I could not let my youth know that I do burlesque for example. So I really have to hide an aspect of myself anytime I was doing and having another job. But when I moved to Europe, I felt like Okay, finally I can just start with a clean slate and do exactly the things I want to do and not feel ashamed. So I think just as part of my backdrop just to be able to continue to create the life I want and live without shame and to help others to continue to live the lives they want, no matter what jobs they choose, is really a lot of my focus.

**Kit Heintzman** 03:52

Tell me a story about your life during the pandemic.

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 03:56

So, actually, when I came back from Europe, the pandemic hit two years later. So I already had a hard time being back in the States and then one foot out the door trying to figure out how I can actually live my life, both internationally and also in the States because my family lives here. They live actually in, in I was born in Dallas, Texas, so my family's kind of scattered a little bit nationally. But my grandmother is 91 so I felt like I need to be closer to her. And as I spending more time with her, I realized like okay, I'm gonna have to stay here for longer. And then the pandemic hit and I unexpectedly had to figure out again, like what to do with my life here because the job that I had is an in person job. I was teaching self defense. I was doing a lot of community upstanding work all of it was in person work, because my background is in social work. So with my master's in social work degree, I do a lot of community based practice. But when I wasn't able to do that anymore, also specifically with how the

pandemic hit nonprofits, I didn't know what I was gonna do. And, you know, then I knew that, okay, I can do some online sex work, possibly. And then I can also continue to do online workshops that were around consent and safety. So I did that, in the meantime, while collecting unemployment. But while I was doing that, again, I just felt like wow, I mean, be living in New York specifically, was really rough. Because of the number of people that live in such a small radius, no one even really lived six feet apart. So I, at the beginning of the pandemic did fly to visit my mom in Nashville, and didn't realize it's gonna last a long, but I ended up staying in Nashville for a month and a half, until I just couldn't anymore just because of family dynamics. And then I moved around to Fort Lauderdale to help another family member, a lot of my family were needing extra support. And again, since I'm back in the US to help my family, I found that during the pandemic cousins that couldn't take care of their kids at home, with the working and school like also at home schooling, really needed my support. So I did that in Fort Lauderdale. And then, yes, I had to just again, during that time, continue to call the unemployment office continue to try to figure out how to make ends meet. Continue to be a bit like, disoriented around like where home is. Because all of a sudden, New York was looking too scary on the news. At the same time, I wanted to be with my partner who was also, I wouldn't say trapped, they were kind of it was actually kind of a thing that they were in the Dominican Republic. My, my partner's pronouns are also they/them. So they actually went for a wedding and then couldn't come back because of the pandemic. So we are both separated for three months. And talking on the phone around about like, well, what are we going to do because I tried to, I want it to take a flight out to the Dominican Republic. But I bought three different flights that they allowed me to purchase the flights, but then I couldn't fly. So I just felt like wow, okay, what is going on with this whirlwind of this COVID plague? And how? And how am I going to survive this when it comes to being a free spirited person? A person who likes to be with people, a person that wants to connect with my partner, I felt very, you know, like, really depressed at a point, you know, like, the felt like I went backwards. Like, why did I even come back to the state who just became, you know, all of this, this funnel of negative thinking around like, Why? Why this is happening. So what pulled me out of it was finally, the I was able to my partner, they pick it up, like from the DR. Back to New York. And so we had a reunion, and we got a place in upstate New York, just to be away from people. And really rethink what we're going to do. At that time, is when I started to just again, continuously, even though of course, it's a hard time to apply for jobs during a pandemic, I had to continue to apply. And I really took a long, hard look at like my life. And like, you know, I thought my life was so much better in Europe. But I think what I need to do is bring part of the self that I learned about about like, the aspect of myself with BDSM work and really creating the life that I want and bring that back here. And so started to put feelers out to my kink community. And then also, we really kept there's a lot of mutual aid support within the kink community here. So and I'm a part of Kink Out, which is an organization that is an activist based organization around sex worker, art, conversation and education. So they every now and then would give me some work gigs that were online and working with sex toy stores to educate people online and just getting creative with that. But then there was a job announcement put out for the sex workers project to hire Director of Communications. And my colleague who's also a pro dom, sent me the the job announcement and said, Hey, I think this might be the job for you. And then I applied and here I am today. Finally I got a job during the pandemic, which was amazing that I've now, for two years, so this is like, this is what has really kind of brought more like balance to my life. So I can actually, you know, be all aspects of myself not have to hide that, actually, it's a good thing that I can talk about sex work, and have come have, and also coming from a lived experience is really important. So, with that said, I'm constantly doing that. And I feel like right now, every day I wake up to, you know, do free writing and meditation and think about what do I want to create, today for myself? How do I how am I going to keep myself positive, so that don't go back into that deep dark moment that I did feel at one point during the pandemic is probably like the fourth or fifth month, that was

just like, What is going on? Like, I don't want to be back there. So. So I'm working really hard not to do that anymore, and just continue to be just grateful.

**Kit Heintzman** 11:01

To the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your experiences with health and healthcare infrastructure, pre pandemic?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 11:10

Oh, so I went from again, living in a place where there was universal health care, to another big loss that moving back to the state, to then needing to sign up for Medicaid, because when I first moved back, I have to start over in a way because was not able to immediately work here. And when I got Medicaid, I really needed to get some, some dental work done. I mean, nerve pain is the worst. And realize, like, for the first time, I used to have I, as a social worker, I used to refer people to Medicaid and to get the services. But now I needed to do it for myself. And I didn't realize how intense it was like, the only thing that would do is pull my teeth. They wouldn't they didn't want to fix anything. And I said, because I have medicated and i was thinking like, Well, no wonder people can't get jobs. I mean, if you have a front any any like a front teeth problems, and you have to get your teeth pulled, then what are you going to do, you can't just go in for an interview. And it just added a whole new layer to why our system is so oppressive here, when it comes to health care. But in general, because also, when I got the I had, luckily, it was in the back of my mouth. But when I got that tooth, pulled it was just such a hard and mean process. It was like I felt like my jaw was going to come out and just didn't seem like a lot of empathy. It seemed like, Oh, you don't have insurance. But then, okay, fast forward when I was like, Okay, I need to get this a job that has insurance. I get insurance, and it's not much different. There's not, especially for dental. I was like, actually, there's not I mean, I'm, I'm now I'm paying. But, um, there's still a lot of expenses here. Like, how can anyone afford this on a nonprofit job, you know, what I mean, with a with a low salary. So I started to as a building backup, and I was kind of, you know, upset, again, about losing universal health benefits to coming back to the system that was, you know, capitalizing on people, you know, peoples who make money, being able to pay for health care, I do feel like I was really disturbed and troubled by that. And then I felt like, it's just a basic need to have health care, and also thinking about my sex work and community and how we just don't have any benefits. So if you have any health problem, there's no support, and you either have to suffer a lot or, and are, you have to work more. And if you work more, especially during the pandemic, then you again, you're dealing with the possibility of getting COVID on top of other STIs because of criminalization, there's just a lot of violation with in-person work. And then, of course, you know, online also, all of a sudden, there was wage step there with the fact that payment processors stopped supporting us. So I do think that it just became more challenging to feel like my like to feel like I was going to have my healthcare taken care of. And then that's just physical health, but mental health, and then also COVID testing and boosting and all of the things you know, the thing that was also really weird during COVID In the beginning, too, is like, supposed to be free for you to get COVID testing at these vans. And then all of a sudden they're asking if you have insurance, and that's like okay, but now you have been have insurance to get this and then now you can today they're like saying, Oh, now you have to pay for the test. And there are some centers that have you pay and some that don't and it's really confusing. As somebody who's into science fiction, I was really again, feeling like this is population control tactic. And even if I'm not somebody who's, quote unquote, conspiracy theorists, because that's such a bad word here. I was really like, well, all of the people that are houseless, all the people that don't have insurance, all the people that are struggling with addiction, I mean, there's so much exposure to illness. And there's actually no support and no care for these people. And elders also on top of that. And so who is getting what is happening now? It's like, the amount of

deaths that were happening in the beginning, of course, also seem to be those people, but people that don't have the support. And I really felt like yeah, this is this is a really, I just, again, didn't feel like this is the safe place to be in general, was like, I'd rather go out into some remote island, like, where can I go? I wanted to take flight as soon as possible. But, um, but yeah, I think again, like, now we're in this, this moment of still needing to be careful. But you know, now a lot of people have been vaxxed and boosted and all these things in New York City. I can, for instance, come into the office space. Now, there's not many people here, but at least like I can separate home life from work life and feel relatively safe doing so. And also now with the sex workers project, job, have better insurance. Although again, it's I will still say it's all relative. It's all relative, depending on how much you make at the job and how much you can actually pay for with the copay, etc. So, so, I do think there's a huge discrepancy with the health care system of course. And it makes it so that I have to work really hard to maintain, you know, my not just my job, but just my spiritual, emotional, physical self, just to stay aligned so that I don't get sick. So don't feel like I'm going to, like fall victim to this system, when it comes to being another person that's really ill and not able to, to be cared or are not able to care for really important people in my family.

**Kit Heintzman** 17:23

Do you remember when you first heard about COVID-19? And what your early impressions were?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 17:30

Yeah, so again, I first heard about it, when I was going to visit my mom and Nashville. I mean, it started to kind of like there starts to be this discussion, because I have some doctor friends around like this really intense flu that people are getting, that ended up being COVID. But so there was already some talk about it in New York. But then when I went to visit my mom in Nashville, then it started to really start, like the news started to blow up around it. And of course, show New York the most, but New York was definitely where we were seeing the most cases. And so I remember looking at that, and thinking like, this is reminding me again, like some weird dystopian movie. I was like, that was like this in that movie *Outbreak*. But yeah, so that was like, this has already happened. So why are they happening again? You know, like, I guess through history, there's the plagues that happen that you hear about, but not like, we were really in the heart of another one. Like, why are we not able to prevent this what is really going on, and it just felt so political. So I was just angry initially. And also fortunate that I was in Nashville because where my parents live is in like a Franklin which is like a suburb and people are literally looking like they're just on family vacation. Like no one's really masking. There's a lot of space in between homes and if you at least can walk down the street and it almost seemed like people are like having more family time and having more joy or something because of from their perspective around the pandemic. But then when I started going to like Target or you know, these kinds of Walmart stores where everybody's like, starting to fight over toilet paper. I was like, this is really looking this is I remember took me back to like 1984 like George Orwell books and *The Handmaid's Tale* like when I read the Margaret Atwood book and I was thinking like, this prediction is looking a little too real right now this is this is insane. So that's what I first was thinking I was thinking like I was in a sci fi movie or or film or if some store like another type of like theories, because I remember like was watching also *Black Mirror*, which is another like kind of futuristic dystopian show. And I used to love these shows, because it seems so like, current, you know, but then I was like, but now we're in it. Now. We're in one of the shows like they stopped the series, because we have now. So it's like where the cameras is, so I was, I was using twisted humor to try to get through it. But it was also just really difficult, difficult to see, you know, to have to wipe down the basket before you push it in the store and try not to cough on people and people, if you do cough, people thinking like you're giving them COVID. Even this to this day, it's like you can't cough anymore. It's like, what about allergies? What about the common cold? So I just think that it's really just

shifted all of our minds. You know, there's something that change the way people see even being together in a space and community. And whether it's work life, family life, I know, there's some families that haven't seen each other in a long time, because if somebody was anti Vax, they were like, Oh, well, no, we can't see each other. And it is very divided is very divisive. This feeling and so that's how it's feeling. I was feeling again, like, wow, this is not okay. Like, I don't know, what's really going on the politics are really crazy of hearing all of the Trumpisms and, you know, spraying drinking bleach and spraying yourself with bleach. And these just seemed like, again, population control tactics, and I just didn't trust it.

**Kit Heintzman 21:25**

You'd mentioned applying for unemployment earlier in the pandemic, what was that like?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce 21:31**

It was a nightmare, I have to call every day for two weeks, and the phone either ring ring ring and not and no one would pick up, or they pick up and then you're sitting there on the call for, you just have to keep the phone on it with hopes that someone's going to come back within two hours. And hear elevator music, it was really bad. And it was really bad. It's like you get a very survival the fittest thing, because like, the fact I was fortunate to be able to apply for it, because again, if I only did sex work and or off the books work, and I wouldn't be able to, but I had to self defense work. So I was able to apply. But you really had to fight to get like and be consistent to get yourself into the system. Also, the system was crashing. I mean, there were too many people that needed it, you know, it was just like, if you even applying for the like, even when you got the unemployment, like we have to do the reporting every week. That was weird, because you have to report you applied to certain number of jobs that weren't even really available. Because no one was able to work, you know, and then and then on top of that, the system would crash. So it's just like it had to, it felt like there was it was more work to even just apply and to talk to anyone. And it was yeah, I felt like a lot of people would easily give up on that process.

**Kit Heintzman 23:00**

What's partnership meant to you?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce 23:04**

Romantic partnership, you mean? So that has been, like I said, I was separated from my partner for three months. And in order to stay connected, we did this one of the many of the Deepak Chopra meditation series. I've never thought I would do those. But I was like, actually, yeah, we should do something like we need to do something to keep ourselves spiritually connected. And even if it's meditating together on over, you know, unfortunately, zoom. We did that. And it really helped us stay connected, actually. And it was difficult, you know, because we really realized that, you know, I actually had a bit of a defeatist attitude at first, like, I don't know what's gonna happen, we might not ever see each other again, kind of vibe. And they were like, no, no, we will and you know, like, we will meet again, you know, so then in the end it became like this romantic reunion you know, when we went Up State to the [inaudible] and we really talked about like, our lives or future lives and, and went far into the future further than we had before around family planning and things which is interesting, because it's like, all of a sudden, you felt like this is so dire, like, like with the world is gonna end sometime soon because of COVID-19. We need to like, really find ways to plan to live the best lives we can right now. And our connection is really important. We still are together and I feel like in some ways that proved it. Because to be able to survive that time, like still stay connected and still miss each other and still love seeing each other when we saw each other again, was really major Um, it's kind of one of those things, you know, if you if you miss somebody that you're meant to

be together, you know, um, and if you don't it fades then I guess that's another that's another sign. But it didn't fade. So it became it was it's continuously getting stronger through challenges. And that was a major one. And I feel like it's really great to have a romantic partner, I am also non monogamous. So we, you know, we are non monogamous. So, we, we have a strong foundation and but we do also believe in not feeling confined to only our partnership when it comes to connectivity, which is also really good. As somebody who likes to solo travel for me, I like to do that. And also to have a partner who's supportive of sex workers and sex work and is open and experimental is really important for me, and because I've had past partners who were really stig, like, really had, like, really were shaming me, and there was a lot of stigma around like, being, you know, I mean, there's too many there's so many layers being bipod, non monogamous, queer genderqueer, you know, I need somebody to be able to accept all of those aspects of me and this partner does.

**Kit Heintzman 26:18**

Other than COVID-19, what have been some of the social and political issues on your mind and heart over the last couple of years?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce 26:27**

Well, I mean, well, now there's monkeypox. So that's, oh, like, okay, here we go. Again, um, that I think right now, I'm also just concerned about I mean, I try. My job is political, but I try not to get too wrapped up in politics, because I need to live my life, right. But at the same time, you know, I am challenged by, you know, the Trump supporters. I live in, you know, I grew up in Texas, so there's still a lot of Trump supporters. And, you know, now when I go to rural areas of Pennsylvania, where some of my friends have land, to see people really still pushing to support Trump after how everything went down, I'm really like, confused. And I also just don't understand, like, what a people from a community standpoint, people's angles around how to, you know, be able to support each other during these really challenging times. Especially with all of the still oppressive and repressive systemic issues that we have here in the States. Um, I'm not saying it's was perfect in Germany, either. Again, like actually one thing, the reason why like Germany, I think Berlin particular is because I have a lot of anarchist friends there. And I have a really great community there. But I did feel like because I have a new more people thought outside the box, and we're not like cultish or, you know, homogenous at all, that it made me feel safer in many ways. Because every way, I'm just not going to be followers and disbelieving whatever the President says, whoever is in power says. So I haven't really concerned about this dictator like structure here. Especially because this just wasn't handled well, this whole pandemic. And now, I don't like that. Every time there's, like a new virus or illness. Like monkey pox, that now it's still, again, a queer disease. It's a disease that comes from sex workers, it's, in order to ever even get the vaccine, you have to say you're queer, and a sex worker. And it just, again, labels people and makes it makes it seem like we are the ones that are passing around illness similar to like, the HIV AIDS crisis. And it just feels like history is repeating itself in these ways. And it's really, yeah, it's confusing. It's like where, you know, there are some progress, there's some progress, but it feels like the progress is more community based. And it's what with mutual aid and when people start to actually come together as communities. But because there's such a divide and conquer, feeling still here in the States, I do feel like it's really hard to maintain community and to also like, feel like you can have your own opinion and you can have your I feel like it's really like you always have to fight against the system. And that's, that's really frustrating. It's really frustrating. It's like, being stuck between a rock and a hard place. I can say I'm fortunate that I have a job but I also know my job but it's really hard. You know, because a lot of people don't understand sex workers work, for example, are the importance of sex workers and in society, and also just the importance of having more equity, and reparation for people who are black indigenous people of color in this country, we are often, you know, the ones to get, or were

the most affected by illnesses. And, you know, and it's because of the inequity, you know, anytime that plague like this hits, we get hit the hardest. So I'm really, yeah, I'm really frustrated. I'm frustrated that not more people are really, instead, there's more Trump supporters instead of people who are actually realizing that actually, no, we need to change our way of thinking here, we need to really think about what is anti oppression. And how can we change the systemic issue so that we don't get hit in the same way, if another ailment comes up, which it will, you know, so that's how I feel about it.

**Kit Heintzman** 31:12

What does the word health mean to you?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 31:16

Health means mind, body spirit, care, compassion, alignment, being able to feel safe. I do feel like those, those pieces really affect your physical health. When you don't feel those things, when you don't feel the line, you don't feel supported when you don't feel safe. I feel like in order to stay healthy, you have to be aware of your own personal needs are and also ask for support when you need it, or know how to ask for support. And I think it's really important to have a community when it comes to help because we all need support in different ways when it comes to our mental health, physical health. Come Community Health is a thing too. So I do feel like health for me has to do with balancing all of the aspects of what makes you feel good.

**Kit Heintzman** 32:23

What do you think we would need to change as a culture to make that version of alignment and awareness and community available to everyone?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 32:34

I think that we would need to actually, first of all, be less ego based. And, you know, and actually more heart based, I feel like our culture is and I'd say our culture, American culture is very competitive. And I know it's have a lot to do with extreme capitalist society as well. But I do feel like instead of listening to each other, a lot of us are competing and not listening to each other. Whether it's for, you know, to prove ourselves to be better somehow, or to get a job or to like, you know, I just feel like there's a sense of importance that people need to have here that makes it hard for them to hear others out and to develop stronger community networks. I don't think we need to be the same to have a stronger community network, I think we need to be able to embrace the uniqueness that we all have. And to all bring our strengths to the table instead of think about what's weak, our label people weak or tell people they're not doing what they should be doing. You know, and I feel it's a lot of finger pointing instead of supporting. I felt like living in Berlin. Still, there's capitalism, but it was more like social capitalism. And then I guess I was exposed to Eastern European cities, which people are like, yes, they're poor, some of them they're not there's not a lot of money there. But there's not also not a lot of homelessness, there's always also a lot less addiction, there's also a lot less, there's a lot I feel like there's something to be said for people to not have such an extreme when it comes to poverty and, and, and what we call success, which is just having a lot of money, which I don't know what I don't, that's not my definition of success, but I do feel like because we're always trying to aim to gain all this money and you know, it's like you never make enough also that's the other thing about living in the state that you're just stepping on people you're not actually working with people. There's not like this real I, I, I'm more into like an African practical system way of being where everyone has a piece of the pie instead of it's like this hierarchical way of thinking about being a community. It's like everyone has something to add everyone has a strength and we we can figure that out. I would like there to be

more think tanks and discussions like that I know more. Mostly those are happening in educational institutions, which I mean, I actually am a teacher at John Jay College for criminal justice. For that reason I teach radical theory, I teach colorism, I teach also constructions of difference, and break down racial, gender and gender constructs and also talk about sexuality. And I feel like that is progressive, it makes me feel good to be able to talk to students around and about topics that I didn't learn about. And that's anti oppressive, but these are, you know, feels like baby steps. But I do think it's still good to permeate like to inspire someone. And I would like there to be more of that. I wish that could happen on a larger scale. And not just in educational institutions, because it's not accessible for everyone here. That's another thing. Yeah. And like in other places, you can be educated if you want to be in here, you have to have a certain amount of money. So it just again, it prevents people from being able to, to feel comfortable in community, if they feel like they again, have to prove that they have something in order to be accepted. Prove that they have a degree prove that they're able to speak a certain way, prove that they you know, have a certain amount of money, you know, I feel like that is constantly there's a lot of discussion around that if I'm hanging out at a bar here, we're in Berlin, it's more about art or like, existentiality or you know, something else. Something else that's not your CV.

**Kit Heintzman** 36:49

What does the word safety mean to you?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 36:54

Um, safety means to feel comfortable in not just only space, but in my own personal my own skin, because I do feel like the body is armor, encasing your spirit. And if I'm spirit feeling spiritually connected, then I feel safe internally, and then I can exude that externally. And that usually brings about also attracting the right people and energy that expands my community. And then when I have an extensive community, I feel safe. I feel like I have safe spaces, different safe spaces to go to. So it doesn't have to be like a cultish group ish thing. But like, for example, when I traveled by myself to Amsterdam, now I have a chosen family there now I've chosen family in Berlin, I have my bio and chosen family, you know, in different parts of the states. And I know where I can go, I need to escape one place. And I feel like that's, that's because of the people that I have in my life.

**Kit Heintzman** 37:59

In this sort of narrow biomedical context of safety under COVID, what have been some of the things you've been doing to keep yourself feeling safer these last few years?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 38:10

Well, I mean, besides getting the vaccine and the booster, when I still mask in the office, office spaces, I still, I don't use as much nearly as much hand sanitizer, but I but I do like I am aware at the beginning of the COVID I was wearing gloves all the time, which was kind of cool, actually. But now I'm a little bit like okay, I don't have to always have this mask on and have a mask tan and I don't have to always like dry my hands out. But I also think that she my body better like I do take more walks I'm fortunate to live across the street from a park Prospect Park in Brooklyn. And I'm I feel like because of that every day, especially when I was working remote I would walk in the park now just make sure that I get time to clear my mind you know walking meditation. I also started doing yoga programming on TV you know, like just doing things to keep my body healthier. Because we all know to like you know, of course if you didn't more ill if you're not taking care of yourself started taking vitamins. Yeah, all around, I just feel like I start taking better care of myself and not taking my health for granted. I did get COVID once but even when I got it, it was after the vaccine after I had the vaccine and the booster. And then I

took that one of the antiviral pack COVID trials, and it actually got rid of it in five to seven days. Um, literally just was like flushing my system flushing my system. So I do think that you know, just realize like, okay, my immune system needs to be there. But but needs to stay strong. made me more aware of that.

**Kit Heintzman** 40:06

I'm wondering if any of your experiences in sex work or queer non monogamy have helped you figure out what safety and boundaries for you would look like in this context of the pandemic?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 40:18

Oh, yeah, I mean, always work because I also teach a Consent Is Sexy course, because I realized people, and especially in play communities and communities and sex working communities here, they're so used to being violated that people don't even think about, like, they don't even know how to ask. Even in regular dating life, people don't necessarily ask for consent. So there's that. And I think that, you know, now to bring that up to We used to throw more parties than we can now because we'd need to ask for more tests. And there's one play party I did go to when things kind of opened up again. And that was just the beginning of this summer, the lesbian sex mafia LSM. Party, they threw a party and a play space, but you have to send in your test results, PCR test results, and then when you got there, you have to do a rapid test as well. So and then they did a timed entrance. So it was very strategically done, which I thought was great. For safety measures, so we just have to increase our safety measures. And that made a lot of sense. Because you don't want to Yeah, that's like say, it's always safety first with any BDSM. And especially with queer non monogamy like, Yeah, always, my partners always have to give test results. Also, like my partner was going to see another partner of theirs in North Carolina, for example, and it was like, great, but did they take like when you get there, I mean, it's kind of tricky, because like, you get on the plane, you think that you think that you're safe, but then you don't know really, I mean, but anyway, one of the trips, they did get COVID from that partner, and that was hard. Because then they came home. And that's actually how I got COVID. So that's, you know, like, that was a that was a toughy. We got through it, but and we care for each other during that time. But yeah, it was, it was really like one of those things like, you don't want to infect a group of people, whether it's play, whether it's partnerships, your family, whatever the case, and you have to be extra careful.

**Kit Heintzman** 42:35

Would you say something about the importance of play spaces even now?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 42:40

Yeah, I feel like again, like, I read this book pleasure activism by Adrian Marie Brown, and I was like, Yes, this is I am a pleaser activist, because it is political to maintain pleasure in your life. It's really like a task, you have to you have to take the time to do it, and not feel guilty about it. Because it's helps increase your serotonin levels, it really helps with mental health. That's what I do love about BDSM work, I find it therapeutic. helps you get out of your body and also in your body. And I feel like, we need those, we need that balance. I think that there's so many people that became agoraphobic, during the pandemic. And also, like even babies growing up during the pandemic social skills are very different. But when it comes to connecting to other people in general, I do feel like I'm not an online connector, I need to see people in person, I need to feel the energy in person. And that is the only way that I feel like I can really like understand, like, whether there's love feelings there, whether there's like, you know, like, I need that sincerity, you know, I need that in person contact. So I feel like yeah, for me, it's been a saving grace. I feel like being able to be around other people who are safe, and really respecting the fact that we

all have different health concerns. And in order and still want to make sure that we're each able to enjoy each other and support each other when it comes to joy and pleasure. It's really important. I also feel like unfortunately, with pandemic, this pandemic, people have been so separated from like, some people are doing not even connected to their body anymore. And so like when I'm doing like bondage work and spanking work, a lot of it is getting people to feel that root chakra again, even that. So I feel like it's super important. It's really important and, you know, when it comes to law now, you know, we've lost a lot of our bodily autonomy stays. I mean, it's really disturbing. And that is why I'm fighting for decriminalizing sex work. Because again, it's like criminalizing and now with the overturning of Roe v. Wade, and, you know, abortion rights being taken away. I feel like we need to continuously find ways to combat those, that those systemic issues because I do feel like that causes more depression and caused us to give up because that's the feel defeated. So we need to be able to create pleasure for each other and ourselves in and in ways that help us literally get out of our head.

**Kit Heintzman** 45:45

What are some of the services that you've been providing to support sex workers over the last couple of years?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 45:52

So we, we are a legal based firm. So a lot of our lawyers are immigration lawyers, and they've helped people actually get T visas. And a lot of people are trans and gender nonconforming that our clients because they are also seeking asylum, they're coming from places that were not safe. They need to pay for their surgeries, they need to pay for their health care and sex work is a viable job for to do that. But in the meantime, with criminalization like if they're even trying to get other jobs, it's really hard. And then as you know, during the pandemic, there were really no other jobs. So even like that, when even when there weren't like you, either washing dishes, or doing sex work and washing dishes, you're not eating nothing, and you're still being exploited and violated. So it's like you have to make a choice. So basically, we help people who had also to get their past records removed, so that there's a [inaudible] bill that we helped with. And so there's like, a lot of policy work also being done. When it comes to dealing with issues around SESTA/FOSTA online censorship, really, online sex is, like sex work is the safest actually didn't have and still that's been taken away. So that's been challenging, but we've been trying to help fight against that and find new payment processors and ways that our clients can be safe when they're working. Any job. But another thing that we do is that I started this documentary series as a comms director here, to destigmatize sex work by just bringing out different aspects of sex workers lives that haven't been talked about. So the first documentary I was lined produced is called sexual healing, and the healing is in our UAL sexual healing. The ual is in parenthesis, because I do feel like it's talking about sex and sexuality and how, how sex workers are educators. And actually, this is the one of the posters from it. We're advocates, experts, activist, educators, healers, and interviewed by different sex workers in the industry around their healing work, and both how they've healed as sex workers through sex work, and also how to heal others because it is both there's a reciprocal process. And so that got a lot of positive feedback. And was it we're in several film festivals, New Fest being an LGBT festival here in New York, and also the Berlin Porn Festival, the post porn festival in Warsaw, [inaudible] Coface in Chile, so it's really, like, traveled and was the first documentary shirt I've ever done. So I was like, wow, okay, great. So now we have the second one, which is, again, these increase the conversation and broaden our audience so that more people are more understanding around other aspects of sex work when normally, you just hear about the negative aspects. And a lot of times people are conflating sex work with sex crime. So we're making this very clear, like, adult consensual sex work is a choice. Also, whether it's, you know, on the spectrum of choice circumstance, and sometimes coercion, it's, it's still a choice that people do make. And it should be, you know, noted that it's a job that anyone can have, you might not know that, you know a sex work,

you don't even know, and I know the person sitting next to you does sex work. It's not like somebody looks a certain way. And so I think it's really great to be able to do this because the second one is called Family Matters, sex worker families, and it talks about how sex workers are parents and guardians and how they provide for their families and their partners and, and the people in their life and there's so many different structures of family, that how important it is for sex workers that have family, and those, I feel like being able to legally support clients to help to change policy and also develop more culturally relevant research, we have this age sex worker Study Act that we're working on now. To help people we're doing research to actually include sex workers as researchers, instead of like, going out and studying sex workers like really going like having a more of a participatory model. And then being able to again show in the media that we are dynamic people that you know, just like anyone else, like some people love their job. Some people hate their job. And in between everything in between not everyone goes and has the best work day, you know, but we our work should not be criminalized.

**Kit Heintzman 50:58**

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce 51:05**

I again, after meditating and having a good morning, I feel good. I'm actually going back to Berlin also, I went over this summer, and I'm going for the Berlin foreign film festival for the second film that's going to be shown. I also do porn. So like, I love to see my porn community when I go there and, and do more creative work as well. When I go to Berlin, so I'm feeling good. I feel like every time I have a ticket out of the States, I feel great, because I'm like, I'm about to go leave here. I can't wait to travel, you know. So I'm feeling positive about that. That's happening next week already on the 19th. And also, my birthday is happening too, while I'm there. So I'm feeling like great. I mean, 46 years, I've made it, you know?

**Kit Heintzman 52:00**

What are some of your hopes for a longer term future?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce 52:05**

Well, one of them is I am actively doing family planning with my partner. And we are we have purchased some land in the Dominican the Dominican Republic where they're from. And it's in the more farm like village and look forward to slowing down and living a more simple life by having financial freedom to also travel to wherever I want. Also, from there, so do like the inspiration and city life, but in the end of the day, like quiet and simplicity. So I'm looking forward to becoming more simple, like simplifying my life more and just focusing more on love and family, life and community. So that not so caught up in this kind of rat race. Here in the in New York, we're going to keep a place here and sublet it. But I do think like, we're kind of over it over the constant working constant, need to think about finances. I'm really done with that, especially also with the way the healthcare system is here. I just feel like it's still better in other places.

**Kit Heintzman 53:22**

What are some of the things you've been doing to take care of yourself?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce 53:28**

Um, well, I do have a therapist. And I go, see my psychotherapist every week. I have also, again, been just keeping a routine yoga, meditation, making sure that you know, there were a lot of friends that wasn't able to see

during the pandemic, so just trying to reach out to them more, and actually go see them in person. Um, and also just Yeah, making sure that I just maintain myself the best I can when it comes to my all aspects of health, like, you know, again, eating well. And making sure that I'm also feeling connected, connected to people connected to life, and not so isolated like it did feel at one point during the pandemic.

**Kit Heintzman** 54:26

Do you think of the last couple of years is a historic moment?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 54:37

Yes, definitely. I feel like you know, I guess it's similar to all of the other plagues and flus and this is another moment of like, getting through this plague. You know, this, this kind of societal plague I feel. And I really hope that this time though, that we'll come up with better plans for whatever else is going to come our way around these things. Because I do feel like specifically within next election, if people are still not into universal health care, I don't know what I'm gonna do, I'm just like, I'm not gonna be here. This doesn't make sense. You know, after all we've been through, we need to learn from these mistakes and, and build community differently, build it better, be more open minded, be more open to change. And when I say change, like structural change, I really feel like that is the only thing that can happen. In order for things to improve. Otherwise, it's again, going back to district nine or TOPIK sci fi film, The computers are gonna take over. And so I, I really am laughing about it. But I really do sincerely hope that we can become tighter knit communities, and that, that are the community building that we have done during times of crisis can continue when we're not in crisis. So that next time that we are hit with anything major it can, it can be any disaster, it doesn't have to be a pandemic, it could be, you know, environmental, but I do feel like, we need to really look at our values and really think about what we really do appreciate, like, I love this conversation for that reason, because it does help me think about that, like, Well, what did happen that helped me stay stay alive and survive this. It was community, it's family, it's lovers, it's people who were, you know, real life, like, our care for each other is, is more important than being at work all the time and making money, you know, quality of life over quantity of like how much time you're spending at work versus how much time you're spending with loved ones. I mean, I think it shouldn't be competitive, I think we should really see that. There's a lot of there's a lot that really important to have community and I feel like that I'm hoping that that becomes stronger over time.

**Kit Heintzman** 57:22

I'd like you to imagine speaking to a historian future someone far enough away that they have no lived experience of this moment. What would you tell them cannot be forgotten about right now?

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 57:41

One thing that cannot be forgotten about right now is the resilience that we have as people when it comes to supporting each other around efforts to help people get health care to help people in need survive through mutual aid supports, to help people by making that phone call and having important conversations that maybe you never had with them before. I feel like being able to connect to folks, despite the challenges that we've dealt with with COVID-19 is really important, especially when it comes to pleasure and increasing pleasure in life. And I feel like pleasure activism should be more it should be more expansive and more known about and I am looking forward to continuing the efforts around that. I feel like I've learned a lot about that during this time. So those are the most important things for me. Pleasure, community, connection, love. I feel like those are very essential parts of life.

**Kit Heintzman** 59:02

I want to thank you so much for the generosity of your time, and the thoughtful wisdom in your answers. Those are all of the questions I know how to ask at the moment, but I'm wondering if there's anything to share that my questions haven't made room for, please take some space and share it.

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 59:21

Well, I will say one thing that I do want to share because I actually, as I've been in the States, I haven't done as much performance artists I did outside the states but you know, but by BDSM work has nurtured also my performance art skills and I'm really hoping to take a lot of the lessons I've learned during the pandemic and use it as a performance art piece that I'm doing. I'm planning on for next year called daymares. Everybody talks about nightmares, but what about de mares? What about the things that happen in your conscious world, like this pandemic, but daymares is also specifically about erotica. Anxiety and the gray areas of eroticism and that has everything to do with pleasure and the challenges that you might deal with when it comes to experiencing pleasure in life. Whether it's with your own self or others, and so I feel like that, you know, as an artist, one way I heal is to actually channel my energy and to create work. And I look forward to being able to share that in the future in museums.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:00:31

Thank you so much.

**Zola Zakiya Bruce** 1:00:33

Thank you