

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

SHELBY CHESTNUT

Interviewer: Nadia Awad

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Nadia Awad: It is May 14, 2017, actually Mother's Day, and I'm here with um, Shelby Chestnut, with the New York Trans Oral history project, which seeks to document the lives of trans and gender non-confirming people living in New York. Um, okay, Shelby, can you tell me um where you were born and what that place was like?

Shelby Chestnut: Uh yeah, I was born in Shelby, Montana in 1981, the day that Reagan was elected. Um, Shelby is a railroad town in um sort of northeastern Montana, it's right where the east meets the west and it goes from the plains to the mountains. Um, at that time Shelby was probably about 900 people, um, it literally still looks the same today. It's like a very desolate town that has a like two block long main street. Um, the railroad made it a very popular town to live, and it's about 30 miles from the Canadian border, so a lot of um, Canadian cattle trading came through there. My parents um—my mother was raised there, my dad was raised about 80 miles east from there. When my grandparents moved there, um, in the 40s from Minnesota, um my grandfather helped build the railroad.

Awad: Your grandfather on which side?

Chestnut: My mother's side. Um, and my grandmother owned a bar. Um, it was called the Sports Club. And it was illegal gambling upstairs and a steakhouse like supper club bar downstairs, and she would get all of her like, cattle imported from around there, but then once a week we would get like fresh sea food from Seattle because it's very close to Seattle, um, and my mother had moved away for years and then come back. Her baby brother had died and her mother had died within the same six months, so she came back to sort of run the family bar, and she's the oldest of four siblings, well now three. And she met my dad, and that's—they met, my dad was re-doing the railroad that summer and they met, and then I was born. [Laughter].

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about your father's family?

Chestnut: Um yeah, I actually don't know that much about my father's family because um, we never grew up there the ways that we grew up around his family the way that we grew up around my mom's side. So my dad was born in Haver, Montana, and my dad is Native and I think Irish, it's kind of unclear what white he is. Um, in Haver, Montana, which is—it goes like reservation towns, Shelby, no, Shelby then Shodo, then Haver. Um, and it was a big basketball and track town. My grandmother worked at a—on my dad's side—worked at a grocer store called Butchry's. She was a cashier there for many, many years, and my grandfather on my dad's side was a professional gambler, and he died when my dad was quite young of pancreatic cancer, and my dad has a sister who is older than him. And my dad is sort of like the, I don't know, like wild child of the family that no one can contain. He's never really lived outside of the state. Um.

Awad: So your father is one of how many siblings?

Chestnut: Two.

Awad: Two siblings.

Chestnut: So his sister is like 75 now and my dad is almost 70. Um, and my dad was incredibly athletic when he was young, so he did a lot of canoeing, a lot of skiing. If you live in Montana everyone skis or canoes, it's like the things you do. Um, and then he sort of traveled along the east side of Montana doing construction work, sort of odd jobs for many years, and that's how he met my mother. Um, I was quite close with my grandmother on my dad's side because my grandfather on my dad's side died because I was born, um, and my grandmother never remarried. And then my grandmother on that side moved to where my parents lived when I was about three so I like grew up around her and she took care of me a lot. And then my grandmother on my mother's side died like, months because I was born, and then my grandfather died when I was, I don't know, maybe 20? He'd been remarried though before my grandmother died. So that grandmother, her name was grandma Maggie, she was the only grandmother that I knew, and that was like, I was the first grandchild that ever like treated her like a grandmother, because she was the only one I knew.

Awad: Can you tell me, um, you had said you don't, didn't know what kind of white your father's family was, but I'm wondering ,can you tell me a little bit about the Native side?

Chestnut: Yeah, so the Native side, my dad is Native, my mom is Norwegian. I think my dad's Irish. It's kind of unclear, I don't know. Everyone was just like you have Irish in you because you all have a little bit of like red hair in your brown hair, so that's sort of how they treated that. My dad's side of the family is from the Ft. Belknap Reservation, which is Assiniboine, and that's uh, near Wolf Point, Montana, and you know, Montana's just a small place. It's like, super tiny, super country, um I think it's different than most places in the United States that have Native communities because um, there are reservations are like 300 to 400 miles big, and then there's all these white towns within them, um, in addition to being tribal land. Um, and my family still owns land on the reservation and it's quite odd because my brother and I aren't enough like Native to inherit the land, but we will get it once my aunt and my dad die. We just, we can never pass it on to anyone, it will go back to the tribe. Um, and those are Plains Indians, they're like, part of the Sioux tribe. Um, yeah, and it was weird growing up in Montana because it's like, everyone is like Native or white there, there's just like literally nothing else. I think I was like, probably six or seven before I met another person that wasn't white that wasn't Native which is odd for most people I think because I think it's the reverse for most people. Um, yeah, I know very little about I think any side of my family which is odd, so.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like growing up in Shelby?

Chestnut: so I actually didn't grow up that much in Shelby. I was born in Shelby and then my family moved to White Fish.

Awad: White Fish, Montana.

Chestnut: Yeah, which is on the western side of Montana, so it's like, in the Rocky Mountains. Um, I mean, it's beautiful, I mean, all of Montana is like gorgeous. Like if you're from Montana I think it's the thing you remember the most is just the sky and just, the mountains are like the size of, they're like unbelievably large. Um, and then I lived there until I was about five. My parents separated when I was four, and um, when I was four my mom was diagnosed with cancer, pretty advanced cancer. She survived cancer, but she was not expected to live, so we moved to Minnesota for two years, where she was treated for cancer, and her bro and my aunt lived there, so we like lived with them and whatever, my parents were separated, my dad was kind of nowhere to be found. Um, and then my mom and I moved back to Montana after her cancer went into remission and lived there until I was in like 7th or 8th grade, um, in a town called White Fish, and then a town called Great Falls, which is actually very close to Shelby. It's on the east side again. It's a big Air Force town, so. Um, I mean, the thing about Montana is it's just like it's very—it's either you're really wealthy and you were born into money or you're basically living sort of in poverty or just like very, very low working class. Um, and so when I was about 14 we moved back to Minnesota and lived with my aunt and uncle again. My aunt had come to visit and I think had seen how hard it was for my mom to like, raise me and work and not struggle, so we went and lived with them. Um, I mean, Montana is just a different place, it's just like—

Awad: What did you do for fun there when you were a kid?

Chestnut: Oh what did you do? You kind of did a lot of nothing. You biked around, you like, got into trouble, you like, you know, like swim in a river and jump off cliffs and that was totally normal. There was very little supervision. I mean, I also think it had to do with the time that it was. Like, the 80s was not a time where like parents were like had cell phones and beepers and told their kids like don't go out. It was more like, just do whatever you want. Um, you know, and it's like a different way of living there. Like, alcohol is a big part of the culture in Montana, like everyone drinks, everyone drinks and drives, um, you know, like people are poor or just like working class like you so it's not something to be ashamed of at all. Um, and a lot of what you do in Montana is like your outdoors, whether it's your camping or whether you're skiing or whether you're hiking or you're fishing or whether you're canoeing, yeah, and at that age I would like see my dad once a year and you know, it was like fun but it was like almost like going to hang out with your best friend because he was sort of like an adult child, so.

Awad: And I guess that was in the summers?

Chestnut: Yeah, or like Christmas breaks or something.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about what elementary school, middle school were like in a place so small?

Chestnut: Yeah, I went to—the middle school or the elementary school memory that I had the most was when I lived in Great Falls, so that was 3rd to 7th grade. Um, and that was—I moved to a place where we had no family, I didn't know anyone there, and I remember starting school. And I always sort of dressed like hip, I really liked clothes as a kid. But I would wear—

Awad: What does hip mean?

Chestnut: Like baggy clothes or like whatever was trendy in like boy's fashion at the time, and my mom would just always buy it. She worked at the this store called the Bon Marche, which is like the Macy's of the west, and so she would get me all these clothes. I was really into cross colors or Stussy, and I had this [Laughter] this fleece hat that was like, it would go all the way down to the ground and you would wrap it around your neck as a scarf, too, but it looked like a little joker hat that was like, down to the ground. Um, and I remember going to school and everyone just kind of staring at me, because I looked like a little bit of a city slicker in like, Bumfuck, Montana. And I didn't make friends right away. I think the first friend I made, his name was Josh Picking, and he was like another mixed race Native kid, and we would just like bike around. And then probably like six months into living there, I made friends with these like, three white girls and this one half-Thai, half-white girl, and like, we all hung out, like inseparably. We lived within like three blocks of each other. For years. Um.

Awad: Were the teachers at your schools mostly white?

Chestnut: Hm, yeah, I think so. That was—I went to a really white elementary school, and then, you know, I had like this whole crew of friends, it was awesome, we like—I was sort of like the we can get away with as much as we can sort of person, and they were like, this is crazy, and they would always stay over at my house because my mom was like, either working or just out and about. And then we went to middle school together in 6th grade, and I think that's the first time I realized that I maybe was different than them because I got separated from them in school and I literally got put on the Turtle Team in the old part of the school and they all got put on the Shark Team in the brand new part of the school, and then I was like oh, why am I with all these Native kids?

Awad: I take it the Turtle Team was for kids who were—

Chestnut: [Scoffs]. Slow.

Awad: Up to speed?

Chestnut: Yeah, and you know, I had some like learning disabilities, which I didn't realize until I was like well into high school but I also just didn't behave well because I had learning disabilities. So yeah, and I met all these different kids.

Awad: So it was kind of like a form of internal—would that be an exaggeration to say it was like kind of a form of internal segregation a little?

Chestnut: Oh it was definitely, like, it was pretty overt segregation, and how—and you know, I would say it to my mom, and my mom is white and she got it, but like, she didn't get it. Um, and so I started to become friends with a lot of the Native kids and started meeting some of the cool

alternative kids from like other elementary schools that all came to this middle school, and I had a really big crush on this kid, Jason Koder. I mean, in retrospect I think I kind of just wanted to be him, not date him. I never did date him. Um, but we would like, play hackey sack and like listen to records and like, be bad. Um, and then I met this girl, Kacie Shindly, who she was—she's straight, but she was like very alternative, so like that felt queer to me. Um, you know, and I didn't say anything about sort of feeling like oh, maybe I'm gay or maybe I'm queer or maybe I'm something. It was also I was like 12, so it's like, we really hadn't gone through like puberty. So I was very appalled when people started dating each other. I was like, that's disgusting. Um, and then—

Awad: Can I back up a little bit—

Chestnut: Yeah.

Awad: And just ask, um, so before you know before entering high school and all that, what kind of ideas were you exposed to, or messages about what boys should be like or what girls should be like?

Chestnut: Like, I think Montana is very different and I say this now, it's like, I can go to Montana looking like I do now and I would not—

Awad: Which is how?

Chestnut: Like just masculine and sort of like a manly looking lady. I mean, I think which most people would describe as like more butch or androgynous. You can go there and it's not even that you're queer, it's that you are just like, you're living in Montana. So it was fine before puberty, because everyone just sort of like looked like little kids, and I think puberty was very hard. I was also like, a large child like, I was like, I've been this tall since I was in the 4th grade, and you know, when I got to college I weight 160 pounds now, but I weighed 210 pounds, so I was like, bigger. I was like, towering over everyone. You know, and I think at puberty I just started acting more like a man. Because it was like oh, I like men's clothing, I liked, you know, it was weird. But it was like, the second it became about like sex to people, I was like, this is gross, like ew, I don't like this. Um, and I was just like very much like a little tomboy. Like, I loved to wear like Umbro shorts and like Stussy shirts and like, tennis shoes and like, bike around. I had my hair cut right here, and shave right here, but it would swoop over my eyes. Like I was really into the skater look, even though I wasn't a skater.

Awad: Did you experience any pushback um like from family members or from your school in how you, you know, were dressing, or?

Chestnut: No, I've been very fortunate that my entire family has just been like super supportive of me my whole life. I think it's largely because I grew up with three of my cousins, um, and the girl in the my cousins, she's also queer, and then my brothers are like skater dude bro types, so we all just sort of like looked the same and frankly I think in our parents minds it was like easier

to raise us like as a monolith than to like try and gender us. Um, no I didn't experience anything. I will say, I started getting bullied really bad when I was like in 8th grade because I moved from Montana to Minnesota and I went to a very conservative suburban high school and it was like the first time I was exposed to super Christian people or super like anti-gay people. I mean, I think there's super anti-gay in Montana, but it just like didn't come up. and it might have been the age I was. But like, I was never—you know, part of it was I was friends with the popular girls in elementary school going into middle school so like, people might not have liked me or like thought I was cute or whatever but they didn't fuck with me, they just like, left me alone. Um.

Awad: So you're going from Montana to Minnesota. Minnesota also has a sizable like Native presence.

Chestnut: Yeah.

Awad: So can you tell me a little bit about how Minnesota in your experience when you were entering high school was different?

Chestnut: Yeah, I mean, Minneapolis has the largest, one of the largest urban Indian populations in the country. I lived, my family, my aunt and uncle moved there in like '86, when my aunt took a job in the Minnetonka Arts Center, which is in the western suburbs. It's incredibly wealthy and incredibly white, and my family lived in like the more working class neighborhood of the rich suburb town Moissetta.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about why they took those jobs, or what it means to be urban Indian? Can you say that at all?

Chestnut: Yeah, I think they took the jobs because like Montana it's sort of like you just stay where you are or you get out and excel, and my aunt was probably, I mean 1986, she was about my age range, like 35 to 40. She was in the arts, you know, she was—she made a very successful career for herself in sort of arts administration, and it allowed her to do her own art. And urban Indian just means, like, people who are originally from a reservation but don't live on a reservation now in urban cities, but it's largely to do with the ways that the government forced Indian relocation, so Minneapolis is the only urban Indian reservation in the country. It's called Little Earth. And then L.A. and San Francisco have huge populations as well because of um, the Indian Removal Act, where it paid people to leave the reservation for like [inaudible] tech skills, but they were never allowed to return, which they didn't know. So that's how that all happened. Um, you know, and it was weird because my family is like, total trash from Montana. Like they're like, super liberal and artsy in some ways, but they're like trashy people from Montana who like leave canoes in the front yard and like drive trucks and you know, that kind of stuff. So we got to, yeah, it was just crazy. it was like, we lived in this like, a bunch of us lived in one house, so it was my aunt, my uncle, and my mom. The uncle was my mom's brother, Peter. He's 18 months younger than my mother, they look like identical twins. And then my aunt who, she's passed away now, but she was like this kind of crazy eccentric artist who was just like the matriarch of everyone's life. She got a job there and she said I'm going to Minnesota for this job and you can

either come with me or not, and that was in the 80s and that's the first time we lived there. And my uncle just loved her, so he went with and took the kids, and they have three kids. Aaron, Roland, and Sara. And we just all were like weirdo, whackado, alternative little asshole kids who, none of us had a lot in common but we all very much looked out for each other. And frankly all in very different ways got teased a lot for either being queer or being not religious. A lot of Christians there, like lots of like good Lutherans like go to church on Sunday, you don't talk to your friends type of people. And we were like, what the fuck is this? Um, you know, and they chose that school because it's a great school district and it had a really good music program, which two of us were deeply involved in music. What's odd is none of us graduated from there except one. We all got either kicked out or went to different schools because it was like unbearable. Um, so I started 8th grade there and I made it until my—end of my sophomore year and then I transferred for my junior and senior year to a performing arts school that was like, 15 miles away. Um, yeah, I was just like—and then I like, oddly the only kids I fit in with there that would like befriend me were the goth kids. So I was like this weird like little skater like hippie kid, but I hung out with all these kids who wore like Marilyn Manson shirts and like, huffed rubber cement. Um, yeah.

Awad: Did you connect with, um, like, native folks a bunch in Minnesota when you moved there? What did the—

Chestnut: No.

Awad: No.

Chestnut: So Minnesota is like super—it's like urban/suburban sprawl. So I lived 10 minutes from the city, but like getting into the city was like an impossible feat. You had to take the buss and it would take like two hours. So no, I didn't at all really. I like—literally I think from 8th to 10th grade I had no friends, and my mom was like it's okay, you're just not very social, and I wanted to be like, ie, no one will be my friend. Um, and then I met some kids that like were maybe two grades older than me. So one of them I'm still close with. And they sort of befriended me and you know, would like drag me around and it was just like, very suburban white, you know like, reject your parents and family type of kids. And then yeah—no, it was like the whitest shit ever. There was like maybe like occasionally an Asian kid. Like once in a blue moon, like one other Native person, although I'm trying to remember, I don't think so. And then like, occasionally one black kid who would get bussed in to pay basketball that like, sort of befriended some of us because we were like not terrible people.

Awad: Um, did you get like, read as Native by the kids who were bullying you or who were giving you a hard time?

Chestnut: No, I think they more focused on like me looking queer than they did anything. I will say that like, I stuck out like a sore thumb because everyone there is like Norwegian and Lutheran so they're like all towhead, like blonde hair, blue eyes, and I have you know, dark hair. I think [inaudible] like look a little different, but I don't think they knew what I was. I don't think they

knew that I was not white necessarily but I don't think they thought I was their kind of white, and they didn't like that.

Awad: And so, um, you know so you said that you were um you got a lot of pushback from students there uh because of uh you know being read as queer, and then you transferred to this performing arts high school. I'm just wondering did you, um, how did you think of your own like sexuality at that time. Or your own, like, did you have crushes on people, that kind of thing?

Chestnut: Yeah, so I was in orchestra, and that was like the one place that was like a safe place for you to be like, every idiot loser was there. It was kind of all the dorks, we would call ourselves like the orch dorks. Yeah, I remember the first person that I ever told that I was like, queer, I don't even remember what I said, I was just kind of alluded that I liked girls. It was my stand partner, Marnie Larson. Who I ran into recently in Minnesota. Lovely person, she like, you know, is also in recovery, grew up, you know, whatever. And she was not queer, but she was like, totally okay that I was, and like, we had this weird flirtation, nothing ever happened between us because we were like 10, but you know, she knew I was queer, and then I met this girl—

Awad: So this is when you were a kid? A smaller—

Chestnut: Yeah, no, I was like—I mean, we were not 10, but you know, we were children.

Awad: Yeah.

Chestnut: I was maybe 13.

Awad: okay.

Chestnut: And I definitely had a crush on her. And you know, oftentimes I would convince myself that I had crushes on guys, but I really in retrospect I think it's like, I wanted to look like them. Like, I was like, oh, that's a cool shirt, or like that's like a nice pair of shoes, or stupid shit like that. Um, yeah, and so that was sort of like the safe world, because—and I liked orchestra because you had gym class with your orchestra mates, so like we never had to interact with like the jocks of the school because we just would have music four days a week and then gym one day a week. Um, you know, and we traveled a lot for that, competing around the state or around the country, um—

Awad: Where did you go?

Chestnut: We went to like, Florida, or like different competitions. Chicago. We went to a really—we had a really good music program. Um, and like, you know, it was a rich area, so kids were really able to pay for like, expensive lessons. And I always took lessons with my teacher herself, like outside of school. Um.

Awad: What did you play?

Chestnut: Cello.

Awad: Oh wow.

Chestnut: Um and so that was sort of like what—and you know, I was doing terrible academically, but people would pass me because they didn't want to deal with me. Um, and they knew I was really good at music, so it didn't really matter that I was terrible at school. Um, and then—

Awad: Was that true at the performing arts high school as well?

Chestnut: No, because when I got there, they actually realized that I was pretty severely dyslexic and had a lot of um, like learning disabilities as a whole, so they like, tested me and put me into individualized classes. I also went from a school that was like 5,000 people to a high school in my graduating class I think was like 80 people so it was very small. It was a public school for the State of Minnesota and you had to apply, and it was tuition free and you could either be a commuter student or a resident student depending on where you lived, and I would commute back and forth. Um, and there was one other kid from my school that got into that school as well. His name was John Ness, and we would commute. Oh, and then this girl that was a year ahead of us. Barb Myers. She played the viola and we'd been in orchestra for years together. So we all like went to school together, like commuted once we got into arts high school. Um, you know, and like literally I remember going to arts high school and being like, this is like fucking paradise. Everyone looks like me, they're all freaks, and there's queer people. And I remember very visibly meeting the gay boys and being like oh my God. There wasn't that many queer girls I don't think. But I immediately was like, this is like heaven, and every fall we would do like a new student welcome, and like, they would play a school-wide game of spin the bottle, and I was just like, appalled that they would be doing that. I was like, so overwhelmed. I was like kind of a prude because I think I didn't know what I was supposed to do. Um, yeah, it was crazy. So many hot girls, and just so many queers, and like everyone was just like these little freaks. It was like every reject from every school in the state of Minnesota came to this one little school and had really rigorous academics, and we would have three academic classes in the morning that were hard, and then the afternoon was spent in our art areas. So I was in music, but then you could be in literature, media, visual arts, or dance, or music. Um, and you—I had like a band, you know, and like, there was jocks that went there and shit, but like they loved the arts, so they had gone to this school because they were coming from schools that didn't have music programs or didn't have art programs. I mean, I will say in some ways it was a shittier experience for me musically because they didn't have a classical program and that's what I'd been studying, but I would have gotten kicked out of school or probably committed suicide had I not gone to that school. Like, it was amazing. Like, I loved that place. That was like—I loved going to school for the first time in my whole life.

Awad: When you were a junior in high school?

Chestnut: Yeah, every day, you'd just be like, dude, I'm like, with all these freaks. And like, you didn't have to explain it. Like, they just got it.

Awad: Can you tell me about a teacher who was you know really formative for you in your life? It doesn't have to be in high school or whatever but—

Chestnut: Yeah, I mean, yeah—I think the teacher that actually was probably was the most formative was Mr. Schmidt. He was my 8th grade social studies teacher, and he was this like super leftie dude who like—we had to do these school debates, and I picked gay rights at the time, which this was like 1994, maybe? '93? And I literally went to school with kids who were like, the gays should be shipped to Hawaii and quarantined, and we had to debate it on the school television circuit. And this kid was just like, going in, and I remember reaching across the table like literally wanting to choke him and be like, you're a fucking idiot. And Mr. Schmidt was like, Shelby, it's not worth it, like, take a step back. He was just really cool, like he would bring me all these um, Rolling Stone magazine to read, because he had a subscription. Um, you know frankly I don't even remember the teachers that much at the arts high school because they were all just like nice. But the students were like—that's what did it for me there.

Awad: So after finishing at the performing arts high school tell me what did you do next?

Chestnut: Um, well I was in love. I had a high school girlfriend. And um, I—like a month before I graduated high school, one of my best friends was killed that went to the arts high school. He was like, biking in the evening, and um, he lived on the Mississippi River in St. Paul, and there was like the Mississippi River Boulevard, which is like just a common corridor where you bike, and he was a photographer, so he would bike around and take pictures like at dusk, and he was biking that night and these kids drove by him and they were like, four white kids from a poor area of that town, and they had a gun and they were just like literally looking for someone to kill. I know that sounds terrible to say, but they drove past him three times and they were like, oh yeah, let's shoot him, like, let's scare him. Um, they killed him. Um, they didn't really know how to shoot a gun, um, and he died pretty instantly there. And then they didn't apprehend the shooters for many weeks because it's an area where like rich people live and they don't pay attention to sort of the river area where a lot of like drugs and activity happened.

Awad: Was your, uh, what was your friend who was murdered, what did he look like, who was he?

Chestnut: Yeah, he was like—so there was like this whole crew of like dudes who hung out at Arts High, his name was Tony Basta. He was like a little hip hop kid.

Awad: Was he of color?

Chestnut: No, he was like an Italian kid. And there was like all of us, the crew that loved hip hop. There was like the little homies that we would all like you know smoke weed at lunch and like drive around in people's cars and like freestyle rap. He was one of them, and he was a photographer. He was like so sweet though. He was a little more gentile than all of them. And he died. That shit was—I mean, that shit literally I think was like a cornerstone in just sort of my own

what the fuck is going on in the word. So before that I had been really focused on wanting to go to school for music and like finding a conservatory program in the university. And after that I really—kind of legitimately had a bit of a nervous breakdown. Um, it was two weeks before I graduated high school.

Awad: That your friend was killed?

Chestnut: Yeah. Maybe a month. Well, I graduated in May and he died April 26, 2000. So like I just took a year off. Because I had applied to school but hadn't really been that serious about it, and part of it was I had terrible grades. I had, um, the arts high school because I had been so dyslexic and had like learning disabilities that were untreated. So like they weren't accepting me to schools on merit, they were accepting me because I could play music. And um, I took a year off. I had a girlfriend at the time. Her name was Rose. She went to Mills College and then quickly broke up with me because why would you not break up with someone if you went to Mills College, it was like lesbian heaven. Then we got back together and she dropped out of college and came back, and um, I was working at this place called Pasquale's, it was like a southwestern deli, and I did their catering and dishwashing, and I got paid like \$15 an hour, which was not bad in the year 2000, I was 18. And I met, oh, these 20-something queers who like either were in school or never went to school and worked in kitchens and like, you know, hung out at night and, I think really then started to come into my own identity, because all of my friends had gone to college and then my girlfriend broke up with me, and then she moved back and we got back together, you know, very tumultuous. And then I was applying to schools and um, had gotten—was going to apply to this place called Antioch College which, my college—or my high school guidance councilor was like, there's a lot of students from Arts High that have gone there, I think it's like a really welcoming environment, you should check it out. And this was like, the internet was just kind of—this was like the internet was a thing now, so I looked it up and I saw queer people on the website. Like, girls with blue hair and like, feminine looking boys. And so I applied, and they were really the only school that accepted me based on my academic merit, and I didn't have to be a music major. Um, but while that was happening, I was in Minnesota, and so I'd been raised by my aunt, my uncle, and my mom. My aunt died very suddenly of a brain aneurysm. Like, I had gone out one night, I'd broken up with my girlfriend, I caught her cheating on me. This is such a drama. I caught her cheating on me, like two weeks before, and then I was like, devastated, and I went back home to live and was commuting, you know, 10 to 15 miles to the city for my job. And I had been out that night with some friends at this kid Trevor's apartment, and he was like this weird kind of like indie goth kid who like loved horoscopes and we were like reading horoscopes and a couple of other people were there, and I drove home probably around 1:30 in the morning, and I got home and my brother or my cousin—my brother, whatever—he was standing in the living room like with his like hand on the window like leaning. And he was like, kind of like the bipolar-y little depressed on, and he was just like, wailing. And I was like, God, I don't really want to deal with this. So I just went to my room. I had a room in the basement. My mom was up north with her boyfriend at the time, and my other cousin was in the Boundary Waters, which is in northern Minnesota. My cousin who is the girl, the queer one, she didn't live there anymore. And I was like, well it's weird that he's here crying and no one else is home. And I figured my aunt and uncle were asleep. Um, so I went downstairs and I just like went to bed and

this was like pre-internet, so like I remember watching TV on a TV. Like on this little teeny box TV. And I'd fallen asleep, and then my sister's partner, or my cousin, sorry, partner came in and said we have to go to the hospital, Andrea, she had a brain aneurysm and she's not going to make it. And I literally was like, what? I was like, this is fucking nuts. And like, I remember putting clothes on and like, getting in the car. I remember what the car looked like, but I was like, no. This is not real. Like, she was the woman who like, loved all of us, she was the vice president of the college, she had shittons of money, she was like the reason we all had lives. And like, she was like the most beloved person you'd ever met, like everyone loved her. And I remember just being in the car, I mean, like, this can not literally be happening. And then we got there and she was dead. I mean, she was like on life support. It was crazy to see a dead person with like a ventilator. Her skin started to start looking weird colors. She was very white, like pasty. Like one of those white people where you can see the veins because they're so white? She was like, becoming more iridescent by the second. Um, and then at this point, we had to try and start reaching everyone. So we got a hold of her mother, her mother flew in. Um, my mom, we got a hold of her. My mom was up north and the power had been out, so we had to like, call a neighbor who had a landline, um, and they walked over and told my mom and my mom came back. Rolland, he's four years older than me, so I guess he would have been just 21 then. He was in the Boundary Waters, in the part of the place where you can't have motorized vehicles, so the Forest Service went in and found him. And it's like a six hour drive back to the city from there, and he I think made it in three hours, like a lunatic. And then it was like midnight at that pint the next day. And they came in there like okay you need to decide what you're going to do. Do you want to donate her organs? So we agreed to donate her organs, and then they do all these like prepping things, it's weird, but then they have to like basically pull the tubes quick with that because everything starts to go down south. So like at midnight we all started saying goodbye and left individually. Uh, what else? We left, and then I left first, and I remember just driving. I couldn't like deal with— I mean, this was crazy. like the woman who had raised me was dead, but like it had not hit any of us. We were just like, this is fucking nuts. And I showed up at my ex-girlfriend's house. I mean, for all intents and purposes she was probably my girlfriend still, because she didn't know what was happening and I was just like, she's dead. And I remember like laying on the floor there and like, I finally lost it. Not, uh, so I didn't go to college right away because my family literally was like a mess. Like my uncle, he didn't even know how to make a bed without his wife. My mom, like, super depressed. All my siblings and I were like, just sitting in the front yard of the house and being like oh. Um. So then that was uh—she died in July. So then I was supposed to go to college in the fall and I decided not to, and I ended up going in the spring. Um, yeah, it was just terrible. You know, it's funny, her funeral was the last time I think I wore a dress. And I felt like I had to wear a dress. I hadn't worn a dress in like a fucking decade, but I was like well, it's a funeral, you have to wear a dress. And like, I remember my brothers like looking at me like what the fuck are you wearing? Um, and then she died, and like my whole family just changed. I mean, they're forever different because of that. Um, and then I went to college that spring. And I again, it was very similar to the Arts High School—I'd never met as many queer people, like radical people, I just loved it. And I was like, this is like fucking heaven. My family sucks, everyone is fucking miserable and depressed and alcoholics and can't sleep and is just rapidly gaining weight because of a death in the family. I'm in Ohio living it up like a fucking G. And then, you know, that was the first time in my life where I had met other people that looked like me and that girls gave me

attention. Like hot girls. Like, not like gay looking girls. I mean, like, that sounds terrible to say out loud but like, faggy, you know, whatever. Like these femme girls would just like pay me attention and I was like wow, this is the life.

Awad: [Laughter].

Chestnut: Um, so, and I got really into school.

Awad: What were you studying?

Chestnut: I don't even know what I was studying. I studied like lesbianism. Um, and I didn't play music, and I never had to go home because I went to school year round because it was a cooperative work-study school so I would go home like at Christmas and deal with my fucked up family who was progressively getting worse by the day, and I was really depressed. I'm, I'm painting a picture like I wasn't. I mean, I was devastated. My aunt—that like—yeah.

Awad: Well you had two close—two deaths in a short amount of time that were people very close to you.

Chestnut: Yeah. Yeah. So that happened. Yeah. Um, but I just met people that I don't know—and I mean, it was weird because Antioch was like full of rich kids and also full of like poor kids too because it was one of the few schools in the country that met 100% of need-based financial aid, so whatever the government said you were awarded, they would meet.

Awad: Hold on just a second. I just have to [inaudible]. Alright, so Antioch. You were around a lot of queer people. You were studying lesbianism, [Laughter]. Can you tell me a little bit about um you know um a good memory that you have from that period when you entered Antioch? Can you tell me a story from that first year?

Chestnut: Yeah, I mean, the whole thing just felt good. Like, I met people that thought like me, I met people that looked like me. I mean, I've like literally since I came out of the fucking womb have like looked like a little man. And yeah, you know, I think right before college I'd started meeting like, queer trans butch masculine like people that looked like me, um, but I actually remember vividly meeting my friend, um, Jenna's now partner/husband who at the time was just transitioning. His name is Ethan. And you know, when I heard the word transgender, I thought in my mind, I was like oh, it's a man who is becoming a woman. And I was like, well, you know, I know she likes femmes, so cool, good for her. And then I show up and I see this like, man, who, or this trans person, who like had facial hair, had boobs but was like, concealing them, and I was like, well, am I trans? Like, I literally remember that. Like, I remember what I was wearing, I remember where we were going. We were going to see fucking um *Dancer In the Dark*, that fucking terrible-assess movie, Jesus I want to slit my wrists 50 times over after watching that. And I had on this like, New Balance like um hoodie that was like a fleecy material but like very thin. It was baby blue with like black writing. And then I had a pair of Echo Jeans on, very baggy, and I wore Nike Air Maxes that were blue with white swoosh. Um,, and my hair was, oh my God, do

not repeat this to anyone, but it will be forever recorded. My hair had locked up at that point, and I had these like, terrible white looking people fucking mats on my head. But I remember meeting Ethan and just being like, oh my God, like, I guess I'm trans, but like, didn't really ever think about it or change anything about me. I was just like, okay, like it makes sense now. And then going to college, that was just continued to be reaffirmed. There was like all these white trans people who were like, you're really confused because you're not on testosterone and you don't identify as he. And I was like, I don't understand what the fuck your problem is. Um, in my second year, I was co-oping on campus, working there, and all of these like little baby butches entered, and that's like a memory I have. Because I was living in this house on campus that was called Panell House, and it has like the student ratio station, a print making room, an alternative library, and then there was a bedroom, so you sort of oversaw the whole grounds. Um. And these like, little baby butches, who are now some of my closest friends. Um, one of their names is Jessie and the other one's name is Ebony, and they were sitting on the stoop of the building I lived in. It was like an old, beautiful, Victorian home, like, talking about girls, and I remember sitting down and like, I was like, oh, they're all girls, but they look like guys, and I'm going to be their friends. And I was real like, I'm the older guy here, like, let me tell you the ways. Um, that was a good memory. I mean, this sounds terrible to admit, but it was like the first time in my life where I'd wanted for so long for girls to give me attention, and they just like, too many girls were giving me attention. I like, hooked up with this one chick, and then hooked up with another chick, and then fell in love with her best friend, I mean, like, it was terrible. But—

Awad: Sounds nice.

Chestnut: It was heaven. I'd been like this little repressed chubby fucking manchild my whole life, and suddenly chicks like gave me attention. I also at the same time started using a lot of prescription drugs, like amphetamines, and I never was a drinker, I can count maybe on one hand how many times I was drunk. And you know, in retrospect I probably started doing a lot of drugs one, because I did have attention deficit, but then two, I didn't have to feel things when I was— it was very hard being away from my family and having so many emotions about death. Um.

Awad: Had you been prescribed Adderall or Ritalin? Is that—

Chestnut: Yeah, so I'd taken Ritalin and Adderall from my classmates, that they'd just given me, and then I went to the school clinic and was like, I'm ADHD and I want Adderall, and they gave it to me. Um, and I did that essentially my entire time in college, and I was like a very good student. I became like, you know, the student body president and all of these things. And I also like, I mean, I learned a lot, like, the things I learned there I feel like most people learn throughout their whole life and you know, I'm like a little bit of a die hard for Antioch. Like it was truly like an immersion experience and taught me to be critical of so much. Um.

Awad: So when you finished at Antioch, tell me a little bit about that. Did you finish in four years? Did you—

Chestnut: Yeah, I finished in three years, and then I—because I entered in the spring, so because I went to school year round, the way my credits lined up I just graduated within three years, and then I stayed working with the college for a year. And then that’s when my drug habit started to get pretty bad. Like, I was like, depressed and really erratic. I also I think in essence wanted to be in like an open relationship with my girlfriend but would not ever say that to her, so would just like cheat on her repeatedly. Um, and she moved to Seattle and I stayed at the college, um, probably six months more, and then I moved to Seattle to be with her and was really—like I had a really hard time finding a job. Like this was like almost 2008 at this point so, it was between 2006 and 2008. Like the economy was starting to tank, I mean, adjusting to like the real world after living in this fucking liberal anarchist bubble for five years was like a little bit challenging. I had a drug habit, I had no money. Um, you know, I would go to like clinics because I didn’t have health insurance at this point and like, whatever. Um, and I lived there for about a year. Um, crazy shit. So I moved there. My college girlfriend was like a really big figure in my life. Her mother, um, died of the same cancer that my mother survived. She was the best friend of my first girlfriend in college, and we got together in a very like hush-hush no one knows way, and then were together for I want to say six or seven years. Both in college, after college, and then in Seattle and then post-Seattle. Um, so I was in Seattle, I was living with her, she’s a really interesting character. I think is incredibly—was incredibly enabling of my drug addiction, and I like pushed that to the point of the limit that you could. And then I sort of like started having like a bit of a nervous breakdown and was really depressed, really broke, and just like really confused as to what to do. And I could not get a job. So I was like I’m going to go back to Minnesota and I’m going to get sober and I’m going to figure out my life.

Awad: What got you to that place? Like, what inside you shifted?

Chestnut: I mean, I don’t think—I mean, I didn’t get sober right away, so I don’t think anything shifted. I think I just was like, she’s not going to take care of me and I need something, and like the death of my aunt was crashing in on me. Also, not for nothing, so I was with her, we were in a relationship, she was like my girlfriend—before I had left to move to Seattle I had fallen in love with this woman who I then later went on to date years later. Um, I was like head over heels in love with her, and I ended up living with her mother and her mother’s partner in Seattle when I had like hit a wall with my girlfriend and was like, I can’t deal with this anymore. Um, and she, I mean, it was really about my drug use. I mean, that’s the thing that like still just irks me today. I’m like, goddamnit, I just fucked so much up because of drugs. Um, at this point I was like becoming really like unhealthily fucked up on drugs. Like, when I got sober I weighed 135 pounds, which—

Awad: And you’re like almost six feet tall.

Chestnut: Yeah, so I was like, rail thin. And so I left Seattle because I was going to like save my relationship. You can text and stuff.

Awad: Sorry, I’m just trying to make sure that my friend’s in Boston. I just wanted to check. Okay. It’s okay.

Chestnut: It's okay. So I moved back to Minnesota, um, and did not get sober for many months, and I got a job at a photo lab, where I would essentially Photoshop ugly suburban children and develop photos. Um, I ended up being a photography communications major in undergrad, so that was like whatever. I think I made like \$10 an hour. It was a terrible job.

Awad: So you went from music to photograph?

Chestnut: Yeah. Uh, and then I um, my family was like really hard to live with. My aunt had died, it had been, I guess, like six or seven years. My family became really, really depressed, they also lived in the same house, really, really abusive and depressed and drinking a lot. My mom had gone from sort of like a functioning alcoholic to like a non-functioning alcoholic at this point. My uncle was just, my uncle and my cousins would like get into fights all the time because they were just like depressed and miserable. Um, I ended up getting arrested twice for prescription forgery in Minnesota um and was arrested and released the first time, and then had a ticket or like a charge pending, then was arrested again and held for two days. And then you know, had to get a public defender, was facing two felony um drug convictions and my girlfriend hadn't left me at this point. The same girlfriend in Seattle. But we were not doing well. She would like come visit me and I was just like too fucked up to even look at her. She was very angry when I got put in jail, rightfully so. Um, I had very few friends because I'd isolated myself from all of them, or like borrowed too much money. At this point I was like stealing money from my mother to buy drugs, like forge prescriptions to get them. So I went to jail, and then my mom let me sit in jail for three days and then I was released, and I had to get a public defender because I was facing those two felonies and they were like, you should go to drug rehab because it will help your case. And I was like yeah fine whatever I'll go. Um, and even at this point I was like, I'm not treating this like it's a drug addiction, like, it's a prescription, it's not like I'm like smoking crack on the street. It's like, I go to work every day and all of these things, like, I'm fine, I'm fine. So I got sober, um. I was sober for six months before I went to rehab, and then I went to rehab. I did outpatient at a like, LGBT place. The state of Minnesota has great public benefits, so if you're low income you qualify for all of these things. So I went to rehab for free at a like LGBT rehab place. I would go three days a week after work, um, and I've been sober now 10 years in August. Um, and then like everything was starting to be okay. I still had my terrible photo job, and then the market crashed in 2008 and I was laid off. Um, and I sort of spent the summer just like being a weird recluse hermit and like, gardening at my mom's house. My mom moved at this point. She moved to a little house like three blocks away from where we'd been living with my uncle for you know, a bajillion years. And I think largely because she was really isolating herself, she wanted to just be a really terrible alcoholic and she couldn't deal with the fighting in my family anymore. Um, she's still close with her brother and all my cousins. Um, and then I finally broke up with my girlfriend. Oddly, she broke up with me once I was sober, which, that seems weird. Um, and then I got a job offer in New Mexico, where a number of my close friends from undergrad had moved post-college, and this woman that I'd been in love with had been there and then left and was coming back and I don't think I intentionally moved there to be near her, but like, I think subconsciously I did that.

Awad: Can I ask, during this time of um, getting sober, did you have any like elders or older figures in your life who were helping to sort of guide you through this mess, and if you can um talk a little bit about that?

Chestnut: The one woman who like literally I think had I thought to call her she would have gotten me out of jail and then been like what the fuck are you doing, but she was incredibly helpful, her name is Marcie, her last name is Renden. She's, um, a Native woman from Minnesota. She's a sort of local author, um, she just released a new book that's doing quite well. Um. And she like, you know, she literally got it. She was just like, well you're Native. Everything that you're doing right now in your life is like because you're fucking Native. You're going to jail, you're like, fucking everything up. Like, genocide has a weird way of working itself out in your life. So she just like, kind of continued to show up and was like, well the next time you get put in jail, why don't you call me? I'll bail you out. Like, she was just like very matter of fact. And then also, my friend Jason who now is a rabbi in San Francisco, he at the time was having a bit of a nervous breakdown himself, like really bad anxiety and hadn't gone to rabbinical school at that point, and he and I had been friends from high school and he was around and he and I both were just like, getting sober or like having terrible anxiety to the point where we were like, becoming agoraphobic, and we would sit in his mom's basement and like watch TV together and just like spend every waking moment. So those two like really were instrumental to me.

Awad: How did you feel when she—when that was her assessment with what had been going on with you for the past, um, almost 10 years at this point. In terms of traumatic things, not talking—

Chestnut: I mean, it was just helpful because she was like, this is normal. Everyone else wanted to be like well you need to go to therapy and there's something really wrong with you, and I was like, are you sure there's something wrong with me, because I kind of feel like it all adds up. Like, I started doing drugs after two people in my life died. You then get addicted to drugs, that's pretty common. And then you start making really bad life decisions and I, like, that was my trajectory. Like, I felt very validated that she wasn't trying to say you really fucked up and you need to feel bad but that she was more focused on this like—

Awad: Like she wasn't giving you a moral, there was a moral—

Chestnut: Yeah, she was just like, what do you need to actually deal with the shit that's causing you to do this? Um, and like, I care about you. So at that point, like, it was evident that I needed to get the fuck out of Minnesota because it was like, it was just too much, it was terrible to be there. It was incredibly triggering, really depressing. I like lived in my mom's little—my mom's house is like literally like—the bedroom, here's the living room and like the bedroom is where that door is where I would sleep in and it didn't have a door. Like I was 25 and living with my mother with no bedroom door, like, it was nuts. Um, so I got a job in New Mexico and my best friend in college, he lived in L.A., was born and raised in L.A. and went back there after college, he loaned me \$1,000 and I moved there and I found—the job included paying for my housing, so I had to find another job, but I was going to be okay because I was like, on unemployment, and

at that rate, unemployment rates were really high because everyone was unemployed and like I think Obama had done like, an employment bailout. Um, so I would get like \$300 a week for unemployment and had my housing paid for and went to be near all my friend that like, were like good like the ride or die homies. Um, and I moved there like a week shy of a year sober, and you know, at that point I didn't really work the program, I still dreamt about drugs like every day. And you know, they say that people who do amphetamines of any sort, it takes about seven years for your body to feel normal again so like, I couldn't sleep regularly, my appetite is still fucked up from drugs. Like, I can not eat all day and not even notice it. Um, I would twitch really bad all the time because I was still like that fucked up from drugs. By the time I got sober, I was doing—I was prescribed originally like 10mg of Adderall per day. By the end, after having done drugs or taken prescription medication like that for I guess six years, I was taking about 1,000mg of Adderall a day.

Awad: Wow.

Chestnut: Which is like the equivalent of like meth at that point. Um, [coughs], I have a really slow heart rate to begin with which is very good because I probably would have died if I had a fast or normal heart rate. Yeah, I looked a fucking mess. Uh, so I moved to New Mexico, and like, it was the first time I'd ever felt like whole. I was sober, I had good friends around me, I had, like, I got a job a like a pizza place and like would do audio/visual on the side and make a lot of cash that way. I had housing paid for in this like beautiful studio, surrounded by artists. I had a boss that liked me, um, and I lived in one of the most beautiful places.

Awad: Can you tell me about the job that you got in New Mexico?

Chestnut: Yeah, I worked at a place called the Santa Fe Art Institute, which, I ran their artist in residency program and I was like a glorified hall advisor essentially, but they have on-site residency programs for mid-level artists from around the country or around the world, and they needed someone to supervise and like be there for insurance reasons at night, so they gave me one of the artist residency studios, like sleeping quarters. And every three months—sorry—

Awad: Oh that's okay.

Chestnut: Every three months, some new artists would come. So. And I would meet people my age, older people. This was, you know, like shortly after Hurricane Katrina, so a lot of the residents coming were from New Orleans and just like really grief stricken themselves, but also making really beautiful art. Prior to Hurricane Katrina they had a lot of folks from New York because of 9/11 being evicted or evacuated from their studios in lower Manhattan. And it just like every three months there was like someone new that I would you know, like get interact with, and I remember there was one cohort of folks that was all around my age, they were all Scorpios, they were all just like insane artists. You know, and they slept all day because they would work all night, and it was just like the life. And I didn't really have to participate like a full staff person because all I had to do was make sure they didn't burn the place down and like, help them when they arrived. Um, and then I also worked at this like lesbian-owned pizza place, which was

awesome and you know, like all my friends hung out there and I worked there. And then like Santa Fe is like a real art town, so there's just like all kinds of side gigs that you can pick up. And there's also a huge Native population, which like for me it was like really empowering to be around Native kids who were also mixed race like me and didn't look like this like typical Native people. Um, and like literally just got what I was going through, and they were queer and they were straight, you know, they were everything and like you just like, you'd look around and be like oh, were like this little motley like skater crew of like Native kids who is like making weird art and just trying to survive. You know, and there was like beautiful shit to do everywhere. Like you'd like go fucking jump off a cliff into like, this fucking gorge. You know, it was like, crazy how pretty it was. I mean, at that point I was starting to feel semi-normal, like a human again. Like, I gained weight, my brain wasn't completely fucking ruined from drugs, um, I like ended a relationship that had been very hard on both of us. Um, and I was there for three years, I think? Yeah, three years. And you know, it's like kind of where the woman who was the executive director there was like, you have a lot of skill, you need to use them, and she encouraged me to apply to school and I got into school and I moved to New York. Um, and I would go back to New Mexico a lot. Yeah.

Awad: Um, so I think as we sort of um, wrap up a little bit, um—

Chestnut: Sorry!

Awad: No, no. No, it's okay. I um, I just want to um mindful of like the time. But um, no, it's been really great hearing these stories. Um, can you tell me a little bit about—so you came to New York for graduate school.

Chestnut: Yeah.

Awad: Um, can you tell me a little bit about the kind of work that you do in New York and um what brought you, what made you stay in New York besides graduate school?

Chestnut: Yeah, um, I do LGBT specific anti-violence work now, um, and I've done that since I graduated. Um, and you know in some ways it was a weird combination of everything I've ever done. I've done a lot of queer organizing, I've done a lot of anti-violence work. I think I've been someone who's been directly impacted by violence in many forms throughout my whole life, and um, if you sort of look at what impacts people's lives, I think violence like is the issue that sort of is the root of everything that people are experiencing. Um, and I hated New York when I first moved here. I was like, this is a fucking terrible shithole place, it is too crazy and the people fucking are rude. And then I got a job offer and I stayed, and you know, I'm really glad I did because I think New York has allowed me to really figure out myself and that—like I don't think there's many places in the world that you can like, be the person that I am, like be this trans, queer, you know, like weirdo freak and still be really successful, both in my life and in my job, and I get to travel the country for personal and work reasons and just like meet other people that are like me and doing what I'm doing. And like, there's such validation in just seeing people that look like you. Um, yeah, I think New York for me is like the symbolism of like—I'd always thought I was

trans, but like never been like well, you have to do certain things to be trans, and New York has allowed me to understand that you actually don't have to do anything, and if you're trans you're trans, and like it truly is just how you feel. Um, and I mean, at a very young age I just remember, like I had—I was very feminine in some ways, like as a child I loved playing with dolls. Like, I had a huge doll collection, I would do like talk shows with them. But like, it was very much in this like I—they're like my little friends and I'm their boss. You know, and I thought of myself as like a little boy from the time I was like, I can remember. Um, and I think New York has allowed me to understand that like, I can be exactly how I am, and that's trans enough for myself, and if people don't like that, well, too bad, like fuck them is kind of what I have to say about that. Um, and it allowed me to see that there is like gender variance. I think for a long time I saw this very black and white like you are masculine or you are feminine, and I didn't like that, but New York it's like everyone is just like a fucking freak. Like, and I mean that like in a really affirming way. Like, people are just freaks, and like, it's okay to let your freak out and make space for that, because I think it needs to be challenged. So New York has been like the thing that I think allowed me to grow up.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about um where you lived when you moved to New York?

Chestnut: Yeah, I lived in a three block radius of New York, and I started living on New York—or Nostren and Deen, and then I moved to Burgen and Nostren, and now I live on St. Mark's and New York. Um—

Awad: So always in Crown Heights?

Chestnut: Yeah, I've always lived in a—I mean, at the time when I moved here seven years ago it was a predominantly West Indian neighborhood, it's rapidly gentrifying and becoming a hipster hellhole. Um, yeah, it was like, I lived with two people who grew up on Long Island and had lived in Brooklyn their entire adult life. They're like super New York. They don't call a bodega a bodega, they call it the deli. They like yell. They're insane. Um, and I lived with them for six years. And then—

Awad: Did you have culture shock when you came to New York after living much of your life in smaller towns in more rural areas with the exception of Santa Fe and Seattle?

Chestnut: You know, kind of, but it was almost like—

Awad: And out west.

Chestnut: Yeah, I mean, it's almost like, I come to New York a lot for work over the years, or just reasons. I was in shock because it's so constant here. I think that was the thing is like, I'm from a place where you could go, go, go, go, go often, but you could always find respite. And here you can't, like, even if you're in your house, it's like there's something going on outside and it's fucking loud. Um, it took me a really long time to get used to it, but now I can't deal with quiet, which I think that that's most people's problem in New York if they've lived here long enough. Like, I

have to sleep with a fan on if I'm somewhere else, because I can't not hear noise. Um, yeah, I was overwhelmed. I was really um, I'd lived in places that were like, beautiful and vast and open, and I moved to a place that you can hardly sometimes see the sky and you can walk blocks without seeing a tree. And I remember when I first moved here I would lay on the fire escape and look up at the sky and be like, blue. Um, and now I get out enough that it's—I'm fine. I do find that I can become very unhappy if I've been in New York for too long and haven't left, but now I leave, you know, probably once a week at this point, like literally, so.

Awad: Um, can you, as someone who—hold on one sec, actually. Ugh, hold on one sec. Okay. And can you tell me a little bit more about where you've worked since you've been in New York and I guess you talked a lot about how New York has shaped your vision of what trans can mean or what—how people can live, you know, different genders, etc. I'm just wondering, how has New York shaped what um, like your political vision or what you're passionate about in terms of your work.

Chestnut: Yeah, I mean, I think to some extent what I'm passionate about I'm a little removed from, even if I think I have a connection to it. Um.

Awad: Which is what?

Chestnut: So I work at a place called the New York City Anti-Violence Project, and we work with LGBT survivors, um, and a program that I've like really personally been interested in and focused on is the impact that violence has against trans people, um, whether it's in the United States or here in New York. Um, it's, you know, we're in May of 2017 and like, to date that we know of, 10 trans or gender non-conforming people have been killed in the United States, and last year I believe about 26, and most of them are trans women of color. Um, you know, I've been very fortunate to work alongside a lot of trans women, specifically trans women of color, in the last five years, and I've seen, I've seen a side of society that I think is grossly under-addressed. That everyone should be doing more work around that to like, lift up the work and ensure the leadership of those communities. Like, you know, I think as a gender non-conforming trans person who is mixed race and essentially, whether I was raised poor or not, had immense amount of access to education and just sort of advancement in my life, um, it's kind of, you know, I would almost say like a moral obligation to ensure that people who might not have the same access as me have that access, because I think I'm the first person in my family to go to college, I'm the first person in my family to really leave the family sort of inter circle. Um, and you know, I'm like successful like in my life. I can take care of myself, and I have like trained skills that are transferrable to other places, and you know, my brothers, like, they work in construction. And I don't say that to belittle their skill, but like, at a certain point their bodies will give out and they won't have many like, transferrable skills. Um, and so many of the people in my family did like, um, physical labor. Um, and I've just seen sort of, the LGBT movement as a whole go from being this like super-lesbian, super-gay boy movement to like, actually connecting back to like the history of trans people and trans liberation, and I see daily just like trans people of color taking leadership and taking over and reclaiming what is theirs, and I don't know, it just makes me feel happy. I mean, New York is hard. It's like, New York is a place where 60% of the youth homeless

population are LGBT, and many people flee here because they think it's like this safe, affirming place. Um, and in many ways it is, um, but in many ways it's the hardest place you could live. It's incredibly expensive, and it, you know, if you don't have money, it limits your access to what you can do and how you can live. And it's a city where the waiting list for public housing is upwards of four years long, and you have young people purposely getting HIV so that they can get bumped into priority housing. Um, like those are things I don't think should have to happen. Um, yeah. You know, and for me I think I started um at an organization that works around violence, and the same year it was the most violent year that we've ever had on record here in New York City. We had three LGBT homicides in a three month period. Um, and one of them, I think, is a case that I became very personally invested in. And not to do because, not to do with the fact that it impacted me, but because it impacted so many people around me, and I could see that it hurt, um, and I didn't understand that until I saw that first hand.

Awad: What was the case?

Chestnut: Um, her name was Islan Nettles. She was a young trans woman in Harlem who was killed—she was standing on a street corner in August of 2013, and these young boys were like, catcalling her, and they didn't realize she was trans at first. And then when they did, it escalated rather quickly and they got into an altercation. Um, and she was pushed onto the ground and had a traumatic brain injury and died as a result of that injury. Like, days later. Um, you know, and before that it's like I'd really been removed from these things. Like, I was like, well people are dying but I don't know them personally. Um, and I didn't know Islan personally, but I remember um, when you do anti-violence work you sort of become desensitized to these things and you talk very matter of fact with your colleagues, um, for better or worse, and you often times have to find humor in really dark things. And I remember just very casually telling my colleague at the time, um, she was our intern or community organizer, I don't remember what her title was at the time, her name is Lala Zannell, and I remember telling her, um, you know, heads up, like, a trans girl was killed, and we're going to have to do a lot of organizing around it. And I didn't even realize she probably knows her. Lala is a trans woman. She's a black trans woman. And Lala knew her. And like, I felt so terrible for like, I mean, to this day I still feel terrible that I like, so nonchalantly was just like, well, another one is dead, we have to organize around this. You know, Lala knew her, not well, but like, the trans community is so insular that like, you know everyone. Um, yeah, like the toll that that took on everyone, I mean the case went on for like fucking three years before the kid that did it was convicted, and you know, that's its own fucking melodrama, but like, when I realized that Lala knew her and was like, I know her, I was like, fuck. You know? Like, people—like you're not removed from these things is like the crazy shit. And it was a real wake up moment to my own sort of naive understanding of violence where I was like wow, people are deeply impacted, and I think when they hear of someone dead they're like, do I know this person? Um, and that's not something that I personally experience a lot. Um, I mean, I've known a councilor of people that have died because of violence, but largely not. And to work every day with a lot of trans women who like, literally between like the 10 trans women that organize regularly with—have known every trans woman that has been killed in the last three years around the United States—that's fucked up. Like there's something that, people need to get behind that. Um, yeah. Sorry I said that again.

Awad: No, it's okay. Um, I think a good place to end is like, if you could tell me a little bit about um, what you envision as someone who um, you know, has been doing this kind of work and has the perspective on gender and trans issues that you do. What, um, what do you envision or what do you wish for for trans communities, given—in the future, given like the climate that we're in and given, um, you know, how dire things are kind of becoming on, you know, on the violence and the rights front. What would you hope for? What do you wish for, what do you work towards?

Chestnut: I mean, it's funny—[phone rings] you want to answer it?

Awad: Hold on a sec, hold on just one sec. Okay.

Chestnut: I mean, I think my friend, um, she's a rather prominent, like, trans person, Janet Mock, she did this interview recently and I don't even remember the context, but she was just like, this little girl met her, and it wasn't about her transness that the girl wanted to be, it was about the fact that she was like, a famous writer that was successful. I mean, I think that's what I would love to see in the world, where like, it's actually less about people's transness, and like, we're not attached to these like, fucking archaic ideas of gender, but we're focused on like, what people are doing well, and like that this little trans kid can be a writer, and like, it's not about their trans identity, it's about the fact that they're really gifted as a writer. Um, and I know that that sounds like a little like peace, love, and happiness, but like, I travel a lot for work, and my gender is questioned every single day. Like, whether it's made fun of, whether it's people are unsure and ask really humiliating questions, or whether they just stare. And I would love someday to just like, not have to worry about that. And everyone around me I think is impacted by that differently. Um, you know, that like, I would love it if trans people could just have health care and like, have all the trans related health care they needed and it wasn't questioned it was just, yeah, of course. And I think it's hard because we've made so much progress for trans people in some ways, and in other ways we have a curriculum political climate that is completely eradicating the minimal rights that exist for trans people, and are very threatened by trans people. But I also feel like it's like, yeah, like, trans people are dying at higher rates than we've ever seen or that we've known about, but like at the same time my mom understands what transgender means now, and a decade ago she didn't. And you know, she can turn on the TV and be like, oh, there's a transgender character. And I think for me I just think normalizing transness as like, a part of society is like, what I would love to see. And I think is happening, whether there's an administration hellbent on killing trans people or not.

Awad: Thank you so much, Shelby, that was awesome to hear about your oral history, to hear about your life.

Chestnut: Was it helpful?

Awad: Yeah, it was great. Thank you so much.

Chestnut: I like, really didn't talk about transness.

Awad: It's okay, you did.