

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ANNA KEYES

Interviewer: Elliott Maya

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Transcribed by Colette Arrand

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Elliott Maya: Hello, my name is Elliott Maya, and I will be having a conversation with Anna Keyes for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is July 14, 2017, and this is being recorded at Anna's home. So, would you like to introduce yourself?

Anna Keyes: Sure. Um, I'm Anna Keyes, I'm 23, I'm a transgender woman, I just graduated from undergrad and am currently finding work here in New York City as a filmmaker.

Maya: Amazing. So you just graduated undergrad.

Keyes: Mmhmm.

Maya: Where do you go to school?

Keyes: I went to Emerson College in Boston.

Maya: In Boston. So how was that experience for you? How was navigating that social space?

Keyes: It was—navigating Emerson was somewhat too part, because I came in male-presenting and it was actually really difficult at first because it's a very extroverted school, and over my first few years there I was forced to like, look at myself and realize I'm kind of presenting this fake person in public spaces. And it took until four years into school that I began to understand myself as trans, and after that, the school was amazing, because it was very accepting, um, and I was able to grow in my last year there a lot. Like, I felt like I grew—I don't know, I feel like I did more maturing from 22 to 23 than I did from like, 13 to 22. You know, it was like yeah. So the school in that period for me was everything I needed.

Maya: So was there any kind of trans community you were accessing at Emerson, or?

Keyes: There was a trans community. Um, I would say mostly the trans people I connected with was through social media.

Maya: Interesting.

Keyes: Um, Emerson is very queer friendly, but that kind of ends up meaning it's mostly white gay men.

Maya: Huh.

Keyes: And there is also like a femme, um, arts community but it's also mostly cis women.

Maya: Hmm.

Keyes: So I wouldn't say it's the most necessarily trans friendly, but my best friend is um, a trans man, so um I did meet them at Emerson, and yeah, I'm sorry—I didn't—they're non-binary, but they're taking testosterone. Anyway, sorry. [Laughter]. Um, so yes and no I guess.

Maya: So what kind of social media were you using to meet trans people, and how were you even finding them and interacting with them?

Keyes: There was this Facebook group called Bad Femmes that my friend Reed added me to way before I even identified as non-binary. Um, and she I guess had a sense that I was femme, but I didn't even really identify that way yet. And it was a small like, 150 person group where it was very much like a group therapy in a way. And I very much posted there, interacted with the community, which was mostly, again, cis women, but there were a few trans women there. Uh, this one woman Drew was like my trans godmother, [Laughter]. She like, really kind of showed me the ropes from the beginning in a way, um, when I had all these initial fears about what was my family going to say, like, how do I afford hormones, um, so that was a wonderful place for me. Um, I was kind of publically out there before I was out-out. So it was like, kind of a testing ground.

Maya: Wow. So in this Facebook group you kind of called it like a group therapy. Would you like to talk more about that function and what it did for you?

Keyes: Sure. It was small enough that it felt like a community, and I think it was a group therapy in a way because um, social media I feel you often are putting up a front, and you're not always, you're not really getting into all of your messy life issues, because you're projecting this perfected image of yourself. But in this group, I felt like you could be completely open about anything that's happening in your life, even if it's potentially problematic because um the people that respond and are going to interact with you, it's not really out of a judgmental angle. Um, I think everyone there—I don't know, it was just a place, it was like no filter I guess is what I'm saying. And um, I felt like I could be completely open there first, whereas just in public life, like, public life for me became also like this very filtered like, I felt like I—I mean I felt like I had to filter and repress my femmeness from like middle school. So this was like a place for me to really start being open-open, which I wasn't for a very long time.

Maya: So you felt you had two selves you had to mitigate?

Keyes: Oh yeah, definitely. Yeah, I took this—I took a queer theory class the summer of my sophomore year at Emerson, and the teacher talked a lot about um, the double life. The private versus public. Um, like we read the Picture of Dorian Grey, which is a lot about that, um, and we kind of did like a queer [inaudible] of it, anyway, back to your question, yes, I actually had this note, [Laughter], that I wrote to myself I think summer of sophomore year. It's in all caps for some reason, and it says "THE CENTRAL ISSUE IN YOUR LIFE, ANDY, IS THAT THERE'S PRIVATE

ANDY AND THEN THERE'S PUBLIC ANDY, AND THE TENSION BETWEEN THOSE TWO IS WHAT CREATES ALL OF YOUR PROBLEMS."

Maya: Huh.

Keyes: And this is like a year and a half prior to me even, yeah, essentially putting the label to my identity. Um, but I did know there was something up.

Maya: Interesting.

Keyes: Yeah.

Maya: So what was that process like for you? You mentioned a couple of times of there was a period where you didn't know or weren't sure, and then there was a period afterwards. Was there like an instigating experience that made you say ah-hah?

Keyes: In a way, yeah. It was definitely slower than like a lightbulb moment, but I tried on a dress for the first time my—the fall of my senior year. Um, I was at Emerson for five years, so in a way I had two senior years, and my first senior year I tried on a dress for the first time and that was somewhat of an illuminating experience. But I still like, like all I knew of myself was what I thought was a man. So in a way I feel like the actual identification was like a slow peeling away process. Um, until one night, um, where my girlfriend Delilah like, we just told each other that we loved each other, and it was getting late and I couldn't sleep, and I went up to my rooftop and it was like, misty out, and it was like 2:00am and I felt like, I don't know, I felt very alive, like the water was like, rather—I don't know the moisture was like, building on my face, and I kind of looked up in the sky, and in that moment I was like okay, you're a woman, like, that's what it is. Like, yeah.

Maya: Wow. And how did you feel after that thought?

Keyes: I felt very clairvoyant. I then walked—I lived in Allston, which is right outside Boston. It's very much like college kid dominated. Um, and yeah, I just walked around the streets, and no one was really out. Um, but yeah, I just felt clear is the best way to describe it. And I won't say I maintained that, you know, because I think—I don't know—I still get a doubt, you know, about my identity. It's not clear 100% of the time. Um, I was socialized as a man, or experienced male socialization so like, I struggle with that all the time. Um, like I'm always kind of doubting whether or not like, is something I'm doing what I was—is this me or is this what I was kind of told I was right, and I kind of still struggle with that. Um, but I find I have moments of clarity that were like that night, um, and that's like my center, I guess.

Maya: Do you have an example of a moment where you struggled with—you know, is this a product of socialization or who you are?

Keyes: Sure. Um, when I'm—there was a night where um we hosted a femme art um gallery night essentially, at my old apartment. And I couldn't help but feeling in the back of my mind like I was

invasive to this space as someone that's "male-bodied" and, um, [sighs] um, I'm sorry, I'm not sure if I'm describing this the best way, but um, I think that's what I struggle with sometimes. It's just when I'm in groups with cis women that are bonding over their girlhoods.

Maya: Mmm.

Keyes: I can't connect with that at all in a lot of ways, and I think back on what my childhood looked like and it was not like their childhood at all, and that's when I feel the divide most strongly probably.

Maya: What did your childhood look like?

Keyes: Um, I was a very joyful, curious person for I think the first 11 years of my life. And I found I mostly connected with women, um, but then I got really severely bullied in middle school in 7th grade, and I feel like that is—like I can actually kind of pinpoint, that's where I feel like the split happened between public and private. Like, before that point, I felt like I was very much the same person in both places, but after that, I adapted, um, kind of a male persona to just fit in with the other people that I was supposed—you know, and there weren't really out queer people where I was from. So I didn't have that group to connect with, so I just kind of had to make due. Um, so I don't even remember, honestly, a lot of my childhood after that moment. Like, my teenage years, like it's really repressed. Um, some things I remember um because I think there are moments that I connected with other women, um, but a lot of it I think was kind of a farce in a way, which is kind of hard to wrap my mind around sometimes because it's such a long time. But um, it's a little hard to look back on that time in my life, because I feel like I wasn't really a person. Yeah.

Maya: Where did you grow up?

Keyes: I grew up in Morristown, New Jersey.

Maya: Oh, is that a big town?

Keyes: It's relatively big as far as um, maybe a suburban town goes. It has like a city center to it, and it's essentially kind of a commuter town for New York. Or it's becoming more and more so that. But I think it was like a decent size. Like my high school was 1,500 kids. Um, but I lived kind of on the outskirts in a way. [Phone rings.] Can I take that?

Maya: Yeah.

Keyes: Hi, mom. [Audio jumps forward]. [Laughter]. Um, so yeah, I think my town was—I would say of an average size, but it has—it's liberal in some ways but it has like, Republican representatives. So I feel like there is somewhat of a conservative like, atmosphere to it, and definitely an atmosphere where like it wasn't okay to be queer in any way. Um, yeah, there's only one—in my school of 1,500 kids, there are two out queer people I can think of. Um, so that was

the atmosphere. And for me, I think the reason I really repress a lot of that time in my life is um, I didn't think—I didn't even know what my authentic self really was, but even if I was conscious of it, it wasn't really an option for me to be that person then, or else I really feel like I would have had probably no social life, um, like, it just yeah. It would have lead to a lot more bullying, and I couldn't take that. So I kind of like, acted. [Laughter]. Yeah.

Maya: Do you have any siblings?

Keyes: Yeah, I have a brother.

Maya: A brother?

Keyes: Yeah.

Maya: Was he or your family like aware of um, you being bullied or the difficulties you were having?

Keyes: I wasn't very open about it, so no. Um, he was also bullied, I think, when he was younger. And I think maybe he did a similar thing in a way, where I think it's common for a lot of men to, um, kind of form this outer shell of confidence and broey-ness that I think isn't really true for him and still isn't, but you do that to um protect yourself from getting harassed or bullied by guys that want to uphold the man card code, all that bullshit, [Laughter]. So.

Maya: Um, I wanted to move towards the direction of your art, um—

Keyes: Okay.

Maya: In the conversation of this inner life that you developed. And wanted to know, how does that appear if at all in your work, and when did you start making art? What kind of art do you do?

Keyes: So I guess I started making art very late in my life, in a way. Um, I did music for a long time, but I always was frustrated with it because I couldn't really write songs. Um, but I made—I helped a friend with a film my junior year of high school, and I fell in love with film. So I did a lot of film in my senior year of high school, and when it came down to um, deciding between schools, I was either going to study psychology or film. And I had to come sit down with myself and say like, okay, film makes me happy, let's just, let's do this, and my mom supported me in that decision. So film is very much my art form, and I feel like I really—I developed my artistic voice at Emerson, and I've always loved comics and graphic novels. Um, and animation. But I started more so with cinematography. So I was interested in visual art, and the visual aspect of filmmaking. So I would largely for the first few years at Emerson be a cinematographer for other people's films and work on my own work but I was feeling kind of dissatisfied because I was like adding to their work but I felt like I wasn't really expressing my own voice, partly because I didn't really feel like I had a voice to express in a way. Um, but I made two projects that I feel really um, really kind of showed that I had an understanding of me being trans without like putting the words to it yet. So I had

one film called A Tension, where it was essentially a horror short about a kid having this tension between his authentic self, which is when he's talking to this friend, this girl in his class, versus his like, performative self, which is like a class clown essentially. Um, so to me that—I'm sorry, I may be getting too [inaudible] [Laughter]. Um, to me in a way, I—I'm sorry. I'm losing my train of thought.

Maya: Don't apologize.

Keyes: Um, so I felt like in a way, doing that project was the beginning of me understanding what was going on um internally for me. And then let's see—my first senior year, I um, I was in a directing image and sound class, and I don't even know what sparked it, but I think, you know, I started dating Delilah in October, and she was someone, she was like the first relationship I was in where I could express myself fully, no filter, all the time. And it was very quick. Within the first month of our relationship that I realized how femme I feel inside, and how I was able to express that around her. So I did this project called Transition, which was an experimental short film that illustrated the monotonous repetition I felt like my life was while male presenting, and then the [sighs] the process of having to kind of dive into myself, look at the root of what I feel is my core, see it for what it is, and then come out and present that to the world as opposed to the, um, the routine that I thought I had to present. Um, and then I think what probably the most impactful class I ever took was a personal documentary class, which, you know, I had always been behind the camera, but in this class our teachers basically asked us to—our teacher, rather, Laurel Greenberg—asked us to film ourselves. Asked us to look at our own lives and like, find the stories within that. And that class was life changing because it was only then that I was forced to really, really, literally look at myself. And at the time when I began the class I was identifying as non-binary, I was still trying to figure out like, am I really trans? I didn't play with dolls, like, I'm not fitting any of this narrative that I've always heard about trans women, but then when I did this film I, by the end of that class, I identified as a trans woman. Um, and in finding my voice through that class, I felt all the sudden that I had a purpose for my art, because I knew that I wanted to illustrate that trans narratives aren't the mainstream narrative that we know them to be, and that it's very nuanced. Um, even our relationships with the past are nuanced, our relationships with our family are nuanced, and I try to show that there are those difficult moments with your family where they may see you as the gender you were assigned, and it hurts, it's almost essentially a mourning process for them, in losing the idea of your, for me, my male self. But that they're people too, and they're—it's a transitional process for them too. And I want to just illuminate that, and that—yeah, there's just a lot of complexity to it, and nuance that I think is completely lost in mainstream narratives, especially when we only think of on narrative, which is, they played with dolls, they wore dresses, um, they wore lipstick, they went into their mom's—you know, I didn't do any of that personally, but are all women like that? No. So like—yeah.

Maya: I agree. Um. Did your family go through that mourning process? And what was that like, if so?

Keyes: I think so. I think they did. And are still, um. So during that class, um, it was February, because it was a spring semester, I remember I called my mom and she had gotten me an H&M

gift card for Christmas, and I used that card to get a dress, which is actually a scene in the personal documentary. And that was my way of coming out to her. I was like mom, I got a dress. And their first reaction was—they didn't really have a total understanding—they thought trans women were drag queens, essentially. I think a lot of older people do, which is really sad.

Maya: Yeah, [Laughter].

Keyes: [Laughter]. Um, but they, my dad's first reaction was, it's like, it's because you're at Emerson. It's because you're at this liberal place. I'm like, oh God. [Laughter]. Um, and my mom's reaction too was like, they were so confused themselves because they were like, you didn't play with dolls, you didn't wear dresses, you didn't wear make-up. And I'm like, but do all women do those things? No? like, I'm a different—I'm different than that. Um, but I still identify this way. So that took them months to kind of wrap their heads around. And my mom I think came around a little sooner than my dad. Um, it's a very slow process, and I was told by other trans women at the time, when I was feeling very depressed about it, that just like time and exposure is what it's about. Like, expose them to the self you identify as and give them some time. And it honestly really worked. I think now my parents are in a much different place. My mom gave me like a femme sweater for Christmas, and my dad who at one point said, um, it deeply embarrassed him, and that—I don't know—I'm not sure I want this in here, but he said, um, he had a nightmare that I showed up at his job in a dress, which really made me really sad and depressed, and felt a little hopeless about this familial situation. And I didn't really think I'd have a relationship with him after he said that. Because like, how can you have a relationship with someone that feels so embarrassed by your existence? But he really kind of came around about three or four months after that when he—we were sitting on a couch watching a movie, and he turned to me and he said, you know, like, no matter what I feel about this, I know that it's ultimately harder on you, and I love you, and I support you. And that was like, total saving grace. And um, yeah. So yeah, I think it was a bit of a mourning process. Um, I think it's especially harder in a way for him because when you're transitioning from male to female or whatever, it's like he's losing a son in a way, you know? He's losing the person who he thought of as a son, and it's kind of like in a way you're like moving out of their camp, [Laughter], that's how I kind of think of it, and I think it's harder, in a way, um, for that. And I know that from my friend that just started T, like, their mom, they're having a very difficult time with their mom, and I think it's a similar thing but just on the flipside. Um, so yeah.

Maya: Yeah. And what was it like filming your life and finally turning the camera back on yourself? Because you'd been behind the lens for awhile at that point.

Keyes: Yeah. It was, uh, that was therapy in a way. Self-therapy. Um, because I couldn't really hide anything. I filmed—the most difficult thing I filmed was about a month and a half after I told my mom that I had bought that dress. She drove me up to Boston and I filmed an interview scene between us. And it's still for me the most difficult thing to watch that I filmed, but it was heated, and she said some hurtful things, but I definitely said some hurtful things. And I haven't to this day watched the full scene, but in that moment I was forced to see, honestly the more—the worst—the less pleasant side of myself, you know? I wasn't putting it on for the camera. It was

like, I had to look at—I had to really look at myself, you know? I think in a way, [sighs], I took out my internal frustration with my gender in honestly I think you can call it like a verbally abusive way to the people I loved. And that's like, that's the truth. Like, um, I'm not proud of that or anything, but I think in seeing that and having to edit that footage, I was like, okay, like, I—no, it's just—I was forced to see myself as I saw all sides of myself. There's—again, on social media, there's the person who you want to show, but that was the truth. And I really had to wrestle with it. And in wrestling with it, I came to understand where that anxiety was coming from, where this nastiness was really coming from, and it was because of this nastiness I held inside me. But I really just kind of hated myself, you know? And I think you can't really show love to your loved ones if you really hate yourself. So yeah, I feel like that's what the ultimate outcome of it was for filming. Yeah.

Maya: That's amazing. Let's take a quick bathroom break.

Keyes: Yeah.

Maya: A little bit of jump in content. We are now having a conversation, we're getting a conversation about rawness and um emotionally work as like trans femmes and trans people, so continue.

Keyes: So in terms of presenting to the public, another trans woman told me pretty early on in my transition process that she smiles more because when she smiles she appears more feminine and that helps her pass. And I remind myself of that sometimes, because I feel I personally wear my anxiety on my face, and I don't look happy when I'm fearful—

Maya: Yeah.

Keyes: But I'm more fearful when I look like I'm not passing, like—it's like this whole thing, and I try to put the smile on.

Maya: Then it's a nervous smile, right? You know what I mean? [Laughter].

Keyes: So yeah, it's complicated.

Maya: Yeah, and um I was wondering if you could say a little bit more about that and like your own experiences. We briefly talked about different standards for like, people of color who are trans and people who are white or white passing who are trans, and I'd love to continue talking about that.

Keyes: Sure. So I think I remind myself, [sighs], I remind myself, like some days are very difficult if everyone is staring at you, if I was misgendered by someone that's close to me or that I look up to, and I feel deep anxiety and depression. And it's sometimes easy to only see my experience as [sighs], hmm, like I see myself as, I don't know, not having privilege.

Maya: Mmhmm.

Keyes: Because of these things that happen to me. But I just try to remind myself and stay conscious of of course I have privilege, I have like white privilege, and that's helped me get into all the spaces where I began to self-identify, and it's affected my entire life. And there's a lot that I'm lucky to have and that I wouldn't have if it wasn't for my privilege. And so it's just this tension sometimes but also this process where I'm aware of you know the oppression that I face, but I'm also aware that there's a lot of oppression that I don't face.

Maya: Do you think that awareness plays into that presence of a private and a public self that you brought up earlier, and how you conceptualize yourself in that? like you mentioned sometimes, subconsciously you're seeing yourself in ways, uh, in different ways, you know? And then you have to say oh wait, but I have to read back onto myself what I know other people are seeing. And like, what is that process like for you and how does that feel?

Keyes: Hmm. I feel like public life is a constant process of coming out, because many people read me as male. Many people read me as a gay man. And it's a constant process of telling people they're wrong, and that I am a trans woman. And I mean, it's hardest I think when interacting with men, because it was through interacting with men that I like studied their ways and I learned how to present myself in a way that would make me pass as someone that's, one, not queer, and one, not anything but cis. And I find, still, often in talking to cis men, I find myself becoming my old self in a way, because that's just what I knew for a really, really long time, and I don't know, it's hard some times, like it's kind of this self-fulfilling—or not even self-fulfilling; if somebody reads me as male I'm such like a vulnerable person that that will affect how I see myself.

Maya: Mmhmm.

Keyes: Um, you know, and I really try to be centered in my self-knowledge, but I can't help but feel affected by how people see me. So that's probably what I struggle with the most. Um, I mean, there's some days where if I get misgendered a lot and just—I mean, there's many subtle ways of um—that people don't respect my womanhood, I don't feel like a woman. I don't feel like—I look myself in the mirror and I see kind of this weird, monstrous creature that I'm really unhappy with, and I can only think about like what if I was cis? Like, I don't have to be any of this, but so I don't know that's kind of what I struggle with. I think—I really wish I could be like, I don't care what other people think, but I really care about what other like, I don't know, it's just so deeply embedded in my personality that like, I have to surround myself with people that see me as I want to be seen and as I see myself, because otherwise I'll start to doubt my identity and probably fall into old habits.

Maya: Yeah, no, thank you very much for sharing that. I was, um, really struck by two things. And the first one was, you said it's a constant process of coming out. Like, I was wow, yeah. Um, I don't know if you have anything more to say about that, but.

Keyes: I think in specifically being a non-passing trans woman, I constantly have to justify my womanhood to people who don't see me as a woman. Or at least attempt to because even in the attempt of me justifying my existence as a trans woman, which is really tiring, really emotionally exhausting, this person may see it as the rantings of someone who is mentally ill or something. Um, because that's how they see gender. They can't—and I think it's deeply, deeply, um, connected to the representation of trans women in media. And that it's only when they're the most, most passing that they sometimes given the helm of womanhood. But if they're not, I mean, like, besides I think Hari Nef, um, who is pretty in the public eye, um, there really aren't a lot of non-passing trans women in mainstream media. And I think that would completely change a lot of people's ideas about gender if there were, but I think it's going to be a long way until we're anywhere near that, yeah.

Maya: Yeah, I think um, why do you think there's a pre-occupation with the passing trans woman?

Keyes: Because the most harmful—let me step back. Um, the most harmful mainstream ideology surrounding gender is that there are real men and there are real women, and this affects people that aren't trans, too. A lot. I think it affects everyone. And I think with that ideology in the back of like the general populace's mind, it doesn't fit that somebody assigned male at birth could be a woman. It just doesn't make sense. And the only way they can possibly see them as something other than a man is if they fit the false idea of a woman that every woman has to wrestle with. But it's that if you're trans, you have to be super high femme all the time to have your womanhood. You have to—like, okay, the thing I struggle with the most in a way is my voice. I had “male puberty” where my voice lowered, and it's a struggle for all trans women unless you're very lucky and this is a very recent thing, you take, um, puberty blockers and you take hormones prior to having your first puberty or whatever, but—I think I'm getting off track a little bit, but—

Maya: No, you're good, keep going. Go wherever you need to go.

Keyes: It's just, there's—I took this audio class, and the teacher of it really said, this range of frequency is the woman range, and this range of frequency is the male range, and I'm sitting there, a trans woman, like okay, great, so like, that's what it is? That's literally, we literally see like sound waves as being gendered? Like, I mean, that's how deep everyone's understanding of gender is, and I've considered training my voice to sound higher, and I've tried a little bit, but oh my God is it hard. Like, when you talk, you talk. You know? How can I—every word that I want to process through my mouth, how can I like—you have to like, sing it. You have to like, really deep, and it's such, it's so hard. [Laughter]. Like, there's already so much labor in trying to appear passing, but just when it's like, you can't even say a word naturally without someone thinking you're not what you—you know, I hate that. I really deeply hate that, but I don't think there's nothing I can really do about it, so I don't know.

Maya: Yeah, and it sounds like you're constantly in some process of like, performing labor, you know?

Keyes: Yes. Yes.

Maya: Do you feel tired of being made to perform? Yeah.

Keyes: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Especially on a hard day. On a hard day, yeah. I feel like there's no room to have even thoughts. I'll disassociate. I'll completely disassociate, and probably fall into like self-destructive habits, because I don't even have the energy to muster up, um, a sense of humanity for my own self I guess. Yeah.

Maya: Wow. It sounds like you still, though, put effort into mustering up a sense of humanity for the people outside of you though, and what is that like?

Keyes: Well, interesting question. Um, that's—I feel like that's shifted over the process of I guess you would call it my maturity as like a person, but maybe my maturity as a trans woman, and that's when I first came out. I was very vocal, and if anyone, I don't know, misgendered me or said something that was transphobic, I would refute that, or I would, you know, I would not stand for it. And I would, I don't know, essentially like, I don't know, um, just argue with them is what I'm saying. But one thing—I've learned to pick my battles anymore because I don't have the energy to deal with every single thing I see that's hurtful and transphobic or transmisogynistic. Um, but also I just think about the people that say these things, they are subjected to this harmful mainstream ideology that's perpetuated by media that I was too. And like, I think about how I didn't know the things I know now at one point in my life, and this person is a human that's the same thing. You know? I had the benefit of education and I don't know so I guess that's what I remind myself.

Maya: Yeah.

Keyes: I don't know if that answers your question.

Maya: No, it does. On—after those hard days, do you have any self-care rituals?

Keyes: I do. Um, art is my self-care ritual. Um, doing hand-drawn animation, which is a very tedious process, transports me outside of my body completely. And I feel that sometimes it's only in being outside of my body and diving into a world that's completely separate from this one, which is completely fantastical in a way and separate from my body that I can come back to my body. I have to leave it. I have to leave it, and it's cathartic. And um, therapeutic to do art, because I'm just able to forget about like my bodily concerns for a bit. And even though it is my body, it's like my hand, or my hands that are creating this world. It's like, that's the world that I'm living in for that moment. And it always happens that I'll like have a bathroom break or something and I'll go to the mirror and I look like the calmest I'll ever look is after like an hour or two of animating. And it always just centers me. And I don't always remember to do it, and sometimes I'll do more self-destructive habits, but when I choose to do art, like, it's always worth it.

Maya: Wow. What is your creative process like?

Keyes: I—hmm. Sometimes two-fold. Sometimes when I'm making art, it will be fairly envisioned before I dive into it. Um, I would say with—when I'm working on a film, I think a lot about the concept prior to diving into it. And I would say I really follow these note cards, I'll really flesh out the concept before I even touch the art. But the other end of me is sometimes I like to—I'll do a gesture with charcoal and a paper and then I'll create something based off that gesture. So there weren't really—so the concepts kind of come to me while I'm creating that art, which I kind of enjoy. It's like a little bit more I would call it a bit more experimental. Um, and a bit more playful. So yeah, I would say there's kind of two parts to my creative process.

Maya: Which of your films are you the most proud of?

Keyes: I'm the most proud of [inaudible]. The film I'm—

Maya: Start again?

Keyes: The film that I'm the most proud of is Bring Her Some Beauty, which is part personal documentary, part animation. And I feel that it's the one work, it's the one piece of art that I've worked on where I feel like it accesses every part of my creative self, but also represents every part of my human self. Um, and I think balances my deep interest in representing reality through observational documentary footage, and my deep interest in non-representational art and creating abstract worlds of color and texture and shape and line. Um, and I think it's a delectate balance between those two parts of myself. And yeah.

Maya: How would you describe your artistic voice?

Keyes: So I think my artistic voice is largely observational in a way. I love documentary for that reason. I love observing life, and then as a filmmaker, boiling it down into what I see as representational of the spirit of either that person or that event or that thing. And to me I just think of it in terms of a spectrum always, and that when I'm representing a person, I never want to show them as one or two dimensional beings. I'm interested in depth, and I'm interested in the often contradicting elements of a person. And I think it's important to represent that through documentary. But maybe more generally speaking, um, I've been thinking about this actually a little bit recently. I think when it comes to visual art, I like questioning the body. And I like going outside of the body but also connecting the body to the abstract, because I think that to me represents what dissociation feels like for me. I feel like I'm often not in my body, especially when feeling really insecure. And I like thinking about how to represent that through art.

Maya: So would you consider the body one of the major themes in your work?

Keyes: I think so.

Maya: Yeah.

Keyes: I think So, but maybe in a way that's not obvious—

Maya: Yeah.

Keyes: Because to me, the body can be many—it could be maybe a mental state more so, um, and that's where I feel like I'm more interested in, like, psychological reality. So --

Maya: The psychological makeup of an event or a person or a thing.

Keyes: Yes, yes.

Maya: That's amazing. Um, so I was wondering if you could tell me maybe the themes or psychological makeup of two of your films that I've watched. Um, the first was Feather By Feather, which I'll describe: It is a very ASMR-y sort of film. It's a close-up of a lot of heavily textured metals, but also skin. And what I noticed about it was that it made things that are familiar, that you might see in the every day, incredibly alien. And then had this amazing like kind of backdrop sort of—not backdrop, but a proliferation of these like, bright colors that still made me feel, but I wasn't supposed to be seeing them, or that they were like alien. And I was just wondering like, what was your intention with that?

Keyes: Um, hmm. So, the video Feather By Feather was a part of a performance art piece in which I [sighs] I wanted to dive into the feelings of uncomfortableness with my own body, jealousy over a cis woman's body, um, the envy that comes with that, and in a way that the performance art piece gets into is that in attempting to reach that level of um cis womanhood, I end up—it's represented through the metaphor for flight, so in attempting to get wings, I end up falling. I end up—essentially it's an unattainable level of being that is just inaccessible to me, even if I make—do all the labor to be a certain way, it is just impossible to reach. Um, yeah, I think—I read—I don't know, I read some trans woman, something about a trans woman where she said, this always sticks with me, that, um, like life as a trans woman is having this idea of yourself in your mind and never being able to reach it.

Maya: Wow.

Keyes: Which I thought was deeply saddening, but I also in a way come to understand that as my reality. Um, so I think Feather By Feather I wanted to kind of dive into that, and maybe the—[sighs]—the otherworldliness of the textures that are in that video I think is representative of where my mind goes when I dissociate. I don't see the world as—like, I don't see the world in terms of how, like, how objects are functional. All the sudden I see the world in terms of like the woodgrain on this table or the lines in the tiles on the ground, or the way the light is affecting the doorway right there. I just focus on in a way very formal textural aspects of like, [inaudible] um, I don't know, I think it might be representing that through the video. It might be, I think, alluded to the kind of mental state that I go into maybe. Yeah.

Maya: Yeah. I think that is a really nice way of putting it, because of the video. Very little of the objects that you're focusing on are kind of shown in full or in action or what they "are supposed to be doing." It's a lot of them at rest, um, or piece, like it's just the tip of something, which I thought was incredibly beautiful. Um, the second film, I wasn't sure if you had created all of it, because it said directed by you and I wasn't sure if you made it, but it was called Wax.

Keyes: Oh yeah.

Maya: Did you make all of that?

Keyes: Yes, I made everything but the um, the production design and animation I collaborated on with a friend, uh.

Maya: Would you like to describe the narrative arc of Wax?

Keyes: Sure. Um, so Wax is about a character, unnamed, who lives in a basement, who melts down red wax into little figures that he then populates a small village of in the basement of his floor—or rather in the floor of the basement that he lives in. Um, and when this character makes these wax figures, it's a ritual for him. He lights incense, he gets into a mindspace that I think is similar to maybe how I feel when I'm making art, and once he completes one of his figurines, he places it in this little red wax village, and before his eyes they come to life. And he just makes this figure and he places it down, and all of the little wax figurines are kind of, they kind of come out of their little wax huts, and they stare at this figure in a way that's somewhat unsettling, and the character then sees that, the wax figure he just made has a crack in their head, and they're not perfect the way he needs them to be, and this breaks him. He gets really frustrated, then he runs back over to his flame in which he shapes them, and he tries to fix the head. He's like, I'm just going to try to smooth it out a little bit, but it ends up melting half of the character, and this just sends him further into a rage, and he runs over into this very red-saturated part of the basement where he hits a button and an alarm goes off, and an unseen figure kind of enters through the basement and gathers up all of the wax figures as the character hides behind a pillar. And he drops a package of Babybel cheese, which has red wax coverings, and then that guy leaves with all of the wax figures. Um, and after he leaves the basement, the character comes over to the wax, slowly at first, but then rushes over, rips open the package, rips open one of the Babybel cheeses, eats it, and then immediately starts forming another figure. And he places it on the ground and stares at it and that's kind of the resolution. He feels satisfied once more with his creation. So yeah.

Maya: Lovely. What was the creative process of coming up with the idea and then executing it?

Keyes: I had this idea, I think it was—so I made that my senior year, but [inaudible] freshman year where I would, I liked Babybel cheese, and I would create little sculptures out of Babybel, out of the wax. So I was like, what if there was a character that only did that? That's his obsession, that was his life? And then I had to kind of develop this world in which like why would he just be doing that, like what's his sustenance? Well, it's cheese. And what, like, what's the conflict in his life.

And I guess the conflict is that, um, somebody takes the figures from him and sells them off, um, and he's just kind of in this repetitive cycle of making them and losing them, making them and losing them. Um, so I don't know—yeah, and I guess it was just kind of, I wanted maybe the more thematic underpinnings of it, which I guess I didn't get into detail about that, the more thematic underpinnings of it are I think about perfectionism and about how art can be—it can be therapeutic and it can be ritualistic, but it can also be—it can also—it can become obsessive in a negative sense. And um, yeah. [Laughter]. Um, it can lead one to very destructive behaviors.

Maya: Yeah. Um.

Keyes: I don't know, I'm sorry if I was [crosstalk].

Maya: No, no, no, that was really good.

Keyes: Okay.

Maya: Um, do you collaborate with other artists, and have you—since you've been in New York since July 1, right? Have you come into contact with other like queer or trans artists, and like?

Keyes: Yeah. No, uh, I've come into contact with some queer artists that I've met through, um, how did I meet this person? It's a friend of a friend, but they're a fashion designer. They go to FIT, and um, I will say I haven't got—I haven't created any art here, besides my own art, my personal—like, some animation that I'm working on. Um, but we've been talking about doing a collaborative photoshoot together. Um, I also create a lot, like my girlfriend Delilah is like my main creative partner, and in creating all of my documentary work, like, she produces it, and she is, for one thing obviously like the main person in the film itself, but she [sighs] just essentially adds a whole 'nother dimension to the film. Um, she's hilarious, so often the moments of comedy are from her, [Laughter]. And um, she just has a mind for logistics so she like, makes everything kind of happen when it wouldn't probably if it was just myself. Um, yes. And—but yeah, yeah.

Maya: Um, so where are you meeting like, other trans artists in New York, specifically? How—where are they? [Laughter].

Keyes: Where are they! Um, honestly, um, as I mentioned before, I guess I kind of had—I was a little overwhelmed when I first came here, and for a little while I didn't go out as much and when I did, I feel like I just, I kept on, um, playing these scenarios in my mind where maybe I'd get hurt or maybe something would happen to me. But that's kind of—and I might have also gone with the heat. The heat kind of fueled some kind of paranoia a little bit. Um. But I kind of finally feel like I'm, like, I know there's a community of trans artists, and I just that there's creative young people that I want to get involved with that I haven't that much yet, but that I know will happen. But I'm kind of an introverted person in a way, so I just don't go out that much, so.

Maya: Are there specific organizations or collectives that you're aware of in NY? You don't even have to be part of it.

Keyes: Oh yeah, okay. Actually, yes, yes. You know, there's this place called the Silent Barn nearby, which is a DIY venue that I—actually I mentioned this already I think—it's a DIY venue, it's a music venue, but I actually came here about a month earlier to show one of my films during this 24 hour show that they put on. So it was mostly music, um, it was mostly small bands or single performers or poetry readings, there was performance art and there were film screenings, so. I met Yasmina, who lives there, because they have an artist in residency program there, um, and she curated um this hour of films. And I got contacted, um, or I was able to get in contact with her through a friend, and when I was there for that show, um, and I wasn't there for all 24 hours, I was there for like, two or three, I saw a lot of trans women perform, I met, um, two other trans women—Lucy, who is one that we've kept in contact with, and she's a poet and I saw her do some readings that I was very affected by because they were very heavy and in a way—I don't know, we sat down and we talked, and we were able to get into a conversation that only trans women could talk about, and that was for us like our struggles with passing versus non-passing and how, the community of trans women is not just like, uh, not immediate—like, I mean, there's a lot of conflict in a way. And part of that is there's a bit of a competitiveness sometimes to passing that I think can kind of—like, when I first came out as trans, I thought that if you saw another trans woman on the public transport, you would be able to like connect immediately and just be like hey, you know. I see you, I see you. But a lot of the time what happens is that person doesn't—that trans woman probably doesn't want to interact with you because that's kind of clocking them, and it might out them. So a lot of my interactions with trans women have been avoidant, like, our gazes avoiding each other. Not all the time. There's been at least, I mean, there's a handful of—I mean, not a handful—there's been many interactions where I've actually talked to different transwomen that I just met on the street, um, when I lived in Boston. Um, did I [inaudible]—sorry, but, I'm just jumbling up my words. Um, that I met on the street or in public transport. Um, but it's not, those are a bit more few and far between. Like I uh, I took some classes at Mass Art, and um there was a barista who was a trans woman who never really—we didn't really ever—I got coffee there every day that I was taking classes, but we never talked and I think partially because—I think she, I don't know, again, I hate passing as a concept, but I think she passed maybe moreso than I did, so yeah, so. It's complicated. But I think a lot of people don't really know about that outside of the trans—

Maya: Yeah. Yeah, um—

Keyes: Community.

Maya: I did not know about that at all. Is there other, like, sorts of conflict in the trans community that you've experienced when you've been here?

Keyes: I haven't been here for too long, but in Boston um yeah, I think, I mean, I think it's been kind of sometimes philosophical differences maybe, or political, like, I don't know, I knew this one trans woman who, I think we just had a very different ideas about what it means to be trans, and I remember she said something like we were talking about um BAGLY, which is the Boston Alliance for Gay and Lesbian Youth, anyway um, it's a community group, um, and a lot of young

trans um youth come there, but also I mean, people of all ages. And I think I was talking to her about getting involved with it, and she was like—she said something to me like, that's for like, amateurs. Something where she kind of derided it, and I couldn't help but think it was a little bit because of her—she was very wealthy, right? And she has resources that a lot of trans women don't, and I think to her she didn't need that, so she kind of passed it off as something not worth being involved. I don't know, I think the conflict maybe comes to who can do what. I don't know, I know that like, in social media, sometimes I struggle like with—sometimes, I mean, a trans woman I recently made friends with posted a lot about um her gender confirmation surgery she got um, in Thailand, and I'm really happy for her. But I didn't really find that she acknowledged all the time what resources led, you know I didn't really see some sort of awareness of yeah, her privilege, and it kind of, it kind of upset me a little bit because I wanted to just be happy for her but I found that in celebrating—I don't know, this isn't a feeling I'm necessarily proud of, but in celebrating her womanhood and in certain language that she chose to express it with, it kind of felt like she was saying like, she was like now I feel like a woman, and in a way to me implying that if you're a trans woman with a penis, like you're not really a woman yet. And um, I mean, that's just how I interpreted it, I don't think she meant it that way, but I couldn't help but feel like a kind of deep envy. I don't know. So that's I guess maybe the more conflict element, yeah.

Maya: I'm going to come back to this after a brief pee break. Alright, so back to conflict in the trans community.

Keyes: Actually I might have—I don't know if I have much more that I, I don't know—I think I might have yeah, so. Yeah.

Maya: Okay, interesting. Um, you mentioned like the sort of divide between like trans women with financial means, and people who aren't of financial means, and is that a common occurrence do you think, or in your experience—even if it's not in New York, but.

Keyes: Yeah, I think it's economic, um, and it's also very location and geographic based because—so I went to school in Boston, and Fenway Health is a really good health care program that's very I would call it like trans literate.

Maya: Mhmm. Interesting.

Keyes: Like they're so progressive that they don't for one thing have this singular understanding of what it means to be trans, because oftentimes I think in the medical community, um, getting hormones comes down to saying about five things that fits the criteria that the medical community have come to understand as what trans is. So, I'm, and otherwise they'll deny you medical care. But Fenway isn't like that. Um, I think they have a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be trans, and that's where I got hormones. Um, and they're quick, too. I was able to get hormones within a month, maybe a month and a half of meeting them, going there for the first time. Um, but I think geographic location is very um influential in whether you can medically transition. I think, and then I think I don't know—one thing I've been trying to kind of put to words lately is like, um, I feel like I can't help but have this kind of privileged, like, academic

understanding of gender that I think doesn't—isn't what a lot of people understand to be gender or would understand to be trans. And I think as someone talked about in like the show like Transparent, but there's um—I don't know. I guess I'm saying, just because I identify as trans doesn't get rid of the fact that I grew up—it doesn't make me understand the experience of um like a trans person of color that hasn't had the same privileges that I—does that make sense?

Maya: Yeah.

Keyes: And maybe—I don't know, I think there's obviously a common ground, um, of shared experience, but also not. Like, the [sighs] yeah, I don't know. I don't know what else to say.

Maya: No, that makes sense. Um, I'm pretty much out of questions.

Keyes: Okay.

Maya: But, if there's anything else you'd like to talk about, we can. I have nowhere to be.

Keyes: [Laughter]. Hmm. Hmm. We hit on a lot.

Maya: You have a lot?

Keyes: No, I'm saying we hit a lot.

Maya: Oh, I was like okay—

Keyes: I have a lot! [Laughter].

Maya: Yeah, I guess I maybe, I have two more last questions.

Keyes: Okay.

Maya: And one was just, you mentioned pretty briefly like you said first and second puberty—

Keyes: Oh yeah.

Maya: And if you expounded upon like what you meant by that?

Keyes: Oh, okay, okay, sure. Um, so first puberty for a lot of trans women, for people that are going on hormones, is the puberty that occurred during your early teenage years that probably had effects that you're not really a fan of. Like for me like that's when my voice lowered, that's when parts of my face like masculinized. That's when my [inaudible] in a way that—I don't know, all that bodily stuff. Your hair gets darker, your facial hair, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Second puberty occurs when you go on hormones, and it can happen whenever you start hormones, but for me it started when I was 22. And it's very like—it's very much like puberty in a lot of ways,

um, because it's just almost more condensed I would say. But it's, to me, when I started hormones it was like the beginning of my girlhood.

Maya: Okay.

Keyes: That's how I think of it.

Maya: Interesting.

Keyes: Um, because trans women were denied their girlhood, so there's a lot of trends, even in trans women fashion, that allude to the fact that, it's in a way their girlhood years or their teenage years being realized.

Maya: Can you give me an example?

Keyes: Sure. Chokers.

Maya: Chokers.

Keyes: Chokers.

Maya: Okay. Interesting.

Keyes: Huge, huge trans fashion trend. Um, partly because it covers up the um, "Adam's apple." Um, but also because it's like what we saw girls doing when they were teenagers that we didn't have access to, and it's us kind of embracing that now. So that's one. Um, and I don't know, for me like my fashion sense has kind of evolved a lot, even just in a year and a half, and I would say when I first started, and Delilah can attest to this, I was very like, girly-girly or like, like what a girl's understanding of what women's fashion is, like, so that's how I think—yeah, and then just in other, you know, in regard—I don't know my sexuality had changed a little bit when I had second puberty in a way that's similar maybe to what puberty, you know, what puberty looks like for many girls. Um, I don't know, in what other regards? I mean, your body is changing, you know? Like, my body is still changing, I've been on hormones for a little more than a year now. Um, growing breasts, like, you know. It is puberty, you know? And when I started hormones it really kind of made me think about how like, I don't know, age is a construct in a way that like, I feel like my girlhood is happening now and that may be denied by a lot of different people for different reasons, but like, the way I see it is like, I think puberty really is like a process of [sigh] kind of becoming, coming to one's humanity, maybe?

Maya: Coming to humanity, okay.

Keyes: And I think I did that in my early 20s rather than—because I never really saw myself as a full person prior to that.

Maya: Wow. That makes a lot of sense to me. That's very, wow, the idea of coming into humanity rather than it being a bodily process I think is perfect. Perfect. And so I guess maybe my last question is how does it feel to be you now, like right here right now? Like—

Keyes: It feels good to be where I am now. Um, I just woke u at 7:30 yesterday, um, I put on a semi-professional outfit and some wedges and I like was walking down the street with my clutch, you know, about to get on the J train to go to Manhattan and I was like—I had this big dumb smile on my face where I was just like holy shit, like, this is what I've always wanted, like, maybe it's not what I've always known that I've always wanted, but I just felt like right. I felt right and I felt—partially I was like, pinch me, is this a dream? [Laughter].

Maya: [Laughter].

Keyes: But you know, I'm like, I don't know, I'm coming into my own and I'm operating in the world. You know, I'm not just hiding behind closed doors, and it's nice to like—although like it's never easy, but to be walking down the street feeling like I'm myself, and like the sun is shining on me, and I'm actually a person in this world, it's everything. So yeah, it's pretty great.

Maya: I'm so glad. And thank you so much for sharing that with me.

Keyes: Of course.