

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

KAI PELTON

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Elliott Maya: Hello, my name is Elliot Maya, and I will be having a conversation with Kai Pelton 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 17th, 2017, and this is being recorded at Kai's home. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Kai Pelton: Hi, my name is Jarrett'Kai Pelton. Um—I'm 21, I am an artist of many different—art—forms—and yeah.

Maya: What kinds of art forms?

Pelton: Um, I—I love music, I love, um—I love all things art, I love—I love music, and dance, and—I love vocal music, I love theater, um, I love visual art, I love all, I like the fact that, I like to see people's expressions. And art is like a great way of seeing that. And art comes in so many different forms.

Maya: When did you know that—art was something that you enjoyed, and that you wanted to pursue?

Pelton: Um—I mean the first thing I remember I wanted to be an entomologist, like when I was really—

Maya: How old were you?

Pelton: I was, like, really little. Like I used to watch these, like, videos, like VHS tapes, of, like, bugs, and it was like—like, yeah. It was like, all the different types of insects, and stuff like that, and I was like, really into them, um—like that was like my thing, I used to love butterflies and caterpillars, which is, which I didn't realize how much it related to me, and also like—frogs.

Maya: Frogs?

Pelton: Like—and like, the tadpole to frog, like—

Maya: Mmhmm.

Pelton: Kind of thing. So like that whole—I didn't realize how much it related to my—life experience until—much later, but now it's kind of—kind of cool. [laughter] But—

Maya: What were you—what—continue?

Pelton: Sorry. Oh yeah, but I wanted to—I—I notice—but also, like I also wanted to be, like, I remember, when I started out by dancing, like I—I love the fact that like, I loved dancing, I used to love, like, hip-hop music, like back, like, in the early—when I was—in like—the 90's, early 2000's, like, that type of music, and—R and B, and—early pop, and—stuff like that. That kind of, like, shaped me into, like, the person I am today. So. I was very much influenced by music, which is—very much, um—from my parents, 'cause both of them are very musical people, my dad's a musician, my mom's played—a bunch of instruments growing up, and—yeah. [inaudible]

Maya: So it sounds like music is pretty foundational to you as a person.

Pelton: Yeah. [laughter]

Maya: When did you start—you said dancing? When did you start dancing?

Pelton: Um, I started dancing—I mean like moving—'cause like when I think of dance, I think it's like any type of—

Maya: Okay

Pelton: Movement, I mean like people dance throughout their entire lives, like that's like, so, um—when I started to walk, like I remember when music would come on I would like, dance with my father, um, to like certain things, like he'd like swing me around and stuff like that, um, and then I remember I started dance classes, like, really early. I think—I did tap, and jazz, and hip-hop. And then later on I learned the ballet, I learned the capoeira, and then I did—like, yeah. I did a bunch of stuff. So dance was always, like, a part of my life. But then, like, I was also put into, like—piano lessons—

Maya: Oh wow.

Pelton: From like the age of three, so like I've been playing piano for a while. Um. And my dad always wanted me to play the guitar, because he plays the guitar, but I never really got into the guitar until I was a lot older. Now I can, like—I like can play a little bit of something on the guitar, but like not really that much.

Maya: At what age did you start all these musical expression forms?

Pelton: It was very—it—it started out very young. 'Cause I remember, like—

Maya: Like three?

Pelton: Yeah.

Maya: Yeah? Sorry.

Pelton: Yeah, like I remember when I would, like, have my piano teacher come over, and—or her son would be there, and he'd play like classical music, and I'd, like, dance, like—what I thought was ballet—

Maya: Mmhmm.

Pelton: And like spin, and like—felt like a—a pretty ballerina, but like, never said it out loud. [laughter] But—yeah. I just remember, like, that was something that I did. And then also, like, wanting to be able to play piano like that.

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: Like that beautifully. So.

Maya: How did dancing make you feel then? And—the follow up question will be how does it make you feel now?

Pelton: Um. Dancing then was like—well it still is, like, it was like, my connection to like—the type of—like, work, or the type of—things, that were like, I loved performing. Like, through dance was, like, performing on stage. You know, like you'd like—put all this work in and then have, like, a recital, or like a performance, where you like show what—how—how far you've come. And—that was always, like, my favorite part, was like—getting ready for the—and like, it's happening, and then you have, like, the costumes, and all the stuff, and like, that was like always, like—really fun, the whole like—yeah. So then that's when, like, theater and stuff kind of like, first started to come in, when I was, like—able to like—do performances through dance. That's like, when I like went to theaters and like would perform at theaters. And then—later on in life, I started to like, actually like get into, like, theater. And I started—then, well—like, later on in high school. And dance now? Or—

Maya: Yeah.

Pelton: Dance now, is—a way of expressing emotions, and—expelling energy that I couldn't otherwise express or expel. If that makes any sense.

Maya: No it makes sense. What kind of emotions do you find that you express through dance that you can't get out any other kind of way?

Pelton: Um. Before I started transitioning, um—I used to vogue as a way of releasing feminine energy. And just to, like, really feel like—all—like that was something that I, like—I remember, like, before I even started hormones, like, I would, like—I would watch these videos and I'd, like, try and like, do these movements, and like since I was, like, pretty young. And I just remember it—it was like something that really did, like—I saw how spiritual it was, for like the people who really—were into it, and how it could be—a release of energy, or a way of coping with, like, hardships of life. That along with, like Amy Winehouse. Yeah. I don't think there's, like. A single song that I haven't heard of hers. And if there is, then I'm very upset about it.

Maya: So—dancing is about—from what I, what I'm hearing, is it about release? Um—feminine energy, um—is there anything else?

Pelton: Um, it's, it's about, it's like a—it's like a physical form of expression.

Maya: Okay.

Pelton: It's like, through—it's like a very tangible, like you can see it, you can—feel it, you can learn to do it. Like, it's—they have—like some people are like, “I can't learn how to dance.” But, like, even you nodding your head is still dancing. So. Yeah. Dance is—a part of life.

Maya: Is there a specific performance that you were in—that sticks out in your head as, just—one of your favorites, and your most, um—that you released the most in? I suppose?

Pelton: Um—Technically, okay so recently, I've never—been to, like, a ball before.

Maya: Mmmhmm.

Pelton: Like, and sort of like, walked at a ball or, like, vogued at one, but I've like—watched videos and stuff like that, but I've never actually, like, gone up there and like, done anything. So. I was

at the—I got invited to one at the Brooklyn Museum, I didn't realize it was, like, a real ball, and that there was, like actual categories, and so I went up and like, just decided to walk randomly, and ended up getting tens, and like battling, and like doing all the stuff that I've seen other people do, and—it wasn't until actually yesterday that I saw, like, the video of like, me like, all like, the whole entire thing, like all, like, my performance from start to finish, and—I was—I was floored, like, I—I was really, really happy with myself, I was like—I didn't remember doing that, like I didn't even know I, I could do that, like, it was—it came so naturally from—it was a full, just like, expression of like, that moment was like, I'm taking like, a leap of courage right now, and I'm just gonna just do this for fun, because I know I, if I'm, if I have fun I can, I can do it. So. My adrenaline's pumping, let's go! like—[laughter] And it ended up being, like, a really really great experience, so like, that was like the first time I'd like, actually just like—let go on—and like, in front of so many people. In such a—vulnerable way. Because if you don't—if you don't know—I mean, not like—I don't know, if it doesn't look a certain way, or if you, if you don't have a certain energy about you, like, you will—like—they, you—you won't get a chance to, like, continue. And, like, keep showing, like—what you can do. And—it wasn't until, like, I got, like, nauseous, 'cause [laughter] 'cause I was really really tired [laughter] and like throwing by body around and stuff, but, um—yeah. I would've ended up, like, the battle that I, that I lost, was—basically, the person who got second place. Was with them. So basically I consider myself, like—third place. In that thing. And that 's, like, my first time ever, so. No one knew my name. Like—they knew both, like, the people who were there, like they both, like—had been around for a while. But like that was just like some random person who just came out, like—let's, let's have a little fun, like I hope I get [inaudible], let's go! And like, ended up being awesome, so.

Maya: When was this?

Pelton: It was—June?

Maya: June?

Pelton: Like, yeah.

Maya: Very recently.

Pelton: It was very recently.

Maya: At the Brooklyn Museum.

Pelton: At the Brooklyn Museum, yeah.

Maya: And had they held balls—?

Pelton: First ever.

Maya: Wow, that's amazing! Um—who taught you to dance?

Pelton: Ooh!

Maya: [laughter]

Pelton: Um—learning how to be a human? [laughter]

Maya: Okay.

Pelton: Like life experience? Um—many, I can't, there's not just like—one person, like many people—

Maya: Many mentors?

Pelton: Many mentors, myself, um—nature—

Maya: Can you tell me about some of your main mentors?

Pelton: Okay, so um—well right now, well, my best friend currently is a dancer.

Maya: Mmhmm.

Pelton: Um—and—she's kind of like a, she's only like a year, a little bit over a year older than me, but she's—very much a mentor when it comes to dance. Um—now. But—before, like I did study at Broadway Dance Center, um—I did Knick City Kids, I like auditioned for like, the, the Knicks, like where you, like, the kids like who—go up and like, dance at, like halftime, or like, do like, that stuff, so I, I did that for a year, um. Which was really fun. That was also like a really difficult year, mental health-wise, but like, I was still, like—I'm, I'm like, doing stuff that I really wanna be doing, so yay! [laughter] But yeah, um. I just—yeah. That was a really—really fun time.

Maya: So it sounds like performance is a big part of your life.

Pelton: Yeah, like. Performing arts, and—

Maya: Yeah. And does it sound—does it go beyond the actual stage for you? Like, does—

Pelton: Yeah, of course.

Maya: Day-to-day life become—

Pelton: It's not, like, really performance, but—for me, it's—like, for example, my customer service voice? Is a completely different person, and I have no clue who that bitch is.

Maya: Can I hear it?

Pelton: — Hi how's it going what can I get you started on today?

Maya: Wow.

Pelton: Would you like a large or a small? And did you want sugar, or anything else? Okay! I'll get that started for you right now.

Maya: Wow.

Pelton: Have a great day, may it be filled with smiles! [laughter]

Maya: [laughter]

Pelton: It's like—really annoying. It's like.

Maya: The fake laugh. [laughter]

Pelton: [laughter] Your—blah blah blah. Like, yeah. I would, like—so I—my manager called it flirting, but I was just, like, trying to—appear human, so. [laughter] I was just like, hey, how's it—like—what can I get you started on? Yep! I like—oh wow, that's a very nice necklace you got going on there! Yes, let's do this! I don't know who she is.

Maya: Is appearing human something that you feel like you have to try at?

Pelton: Yes!

Maya: Yes? Tell me more!

Pelton: Um—like—for me, appearing human is acting like—there are like, certain like, social things that, like, took me a while to realize that you have to—I personally have to focus on doing. Like, the way I'm perceived by people is something that I have to pay attention to, because if I don't, I could just—do whatever my heart desires, and not really, like—notice, like, the consequences, socially, and—whatever else. Um—so yeah, like—for me, like, being human is like, being able to like, ride the train, and not look like I'm in pain from anxiety. [laughter] Or, um—like—doing things that, like, curb dysphoria, so I just feel mentally, like, okay when I go outside. Or, um—yeah, so like, for me, like, appearing human is mainly like—doing the things I need to do to—feel sound in my body, and any space that I'm in. Because, like, for a lot of people, no—like, there isn't really—any truly, truly safe space, because it could be, like, invaded at any moment by—something or someone unsafe. So—that, yeah. You have to make it safe for yourself. By—radiating positive energy, and—requesting hugs.

Maya: Mmhmm—No I like that, I like the idea of—creating, like, a moving space, that is you.

Pelton: Mmhmm.

Maya: Because of your immediate bubble—

Pelton: Yeah.

Maya: As you put off your energy—

Pelton: Yeah.

Maya: And do the work to protect that energy.

Pelton: Yeah! That's literally like—

Maya: I mean it's—

Pelton: That's kind of been how I, I did it—that's a beautiful way of putting it. Because I've never been able to, like, verbalize it in that way? Because—if there isn't ever a truly safe space, like, around you, because you never know what another human can do—

Maya: Mmhmm.

Pelton: You have to create, like, a bubble of safe space that other people can come into, like, you like, even like, if that's just like, a hug, that's coming into like, that's—that's a safe—that's like the only safe space, like, [laughter] is hugs. Or, like—sorry—or like—'cause any, any person could switch, and make a space unsafe—I don't know how to like describe that.

Maya: No it sounds kind of like—performance as strategy.

Pelton: Mmhmm.

Maya: But also you love it, it's a passion.

Pelton: Yeah, it's a passion, but it's also, like—a strategy.

Maya: A tool for survival.

Pelton: It's a tool. Um—and that's what, the one thing I like about art, is that there's—art is practical. Like, there are many different, like—every art is like, the basis of most of, like, society. Like the buildings you see, like everything that you use, your pens, your notebooks, your microphones or whatever else—um—all of those things are—art. They've all been, like, designed, and drawn, and made to look like the way they do. And, yeah. That's really interesting to me. That's why I like art. 'Cause it's—everything.

Maya: So when you say expression—

Pelton: Mmhmm?

Maya: Does—with art—um—is gender, sexuality, race, class—things you address in your own art? Like do you actually make art? Besides performance. We've not said any—

Pelton: Um—I have, often, like—the art that I've made, if it's like visual, or something I've drawn, has always been, like—a visual representation of, like—a feeling that, like, is really hard to describe.

Maya: Mmhmm.

Pelton: So like, usually it involves, like—I draw a lot of eyes? Like—I, I remember, like, learning how to draw an eye, and I thought that was like, the, the coolest thing, because I remembered, like, that was something that like—making eye contact is weird, okay, it's just, like, in different societies, it, they mean different things, and like—no, it's weird, 'cause, eye contact—oh! [laughter] Um—but, yeah, there's like, a lot of different things about, like—the eye. Or like different types of eyes, how different animals have different eyes, how that looks, that's something that's really interesting to me. Yeah.

Maya: That's really cool. Um—how long have you been in New York?

Pelton: My entire life.

Maya: Your entire life.

Pelton: Yeah, I was born and raised here.

Maya: Born and raised. Which borough?

Pelton: Um, I was born in Manhattan, on the upper west side, and raised in Brooklyn.

Maya: Oh.

Pelton: Um—like—right in, like, the heart of Brooklyn pretty much.

Maya: Oh.

Pelton: Like, right where, like—The Brooklyn Museum, where the—with Prospect Park, and the Botanic Gardens—I—originally I, I lived right across the street from The Brooklyn Museum and the Botanic Gardens, and now I live—walking distance from Fort Greene Park, from downtown, from Atlantic Terminal, from—Bed-Stuy, from, like—so, I live in a place that's, like, kind of—yeah. Like, I can get anywhere in Brooklyn. Or anywhere in, like, New York City, like, really easily from just where I live. So.

Maya: Have you ever encountered, like—queer, or trans, like, performance communities, or art communities, in New York?

Pelton: Not like—I mean, I have, but like—the ones that, like, shaped me, weren't specifically—targeted towards queer and trans people—

Maya: Mmhmm?

Pelton: But it was just, like—they were just open to any kind of people—

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: Any kind of person. And me as a queer person who didn't really have, like, like a space, or a circle, where I felt really sound, like—for me, like—when I—uh, in high school, I joined a theater group called CAT Youth Theater, Creative Arts Team Youth Theater, I was part of the community, um—and that really did shape—excuse me—um, who I am as a person, like, now as an adult. Like, it taught me—it was like, the first, like, of like—like, in theater—like it was based on improv, on devising theater, on using theater to—start conversations, to say things that are hard to say, or to teach things that are hard to teach, and—we were allowed to—create scenes about anything we wanted. Like there were no—boundaries of what we could do, it was literally anything our minds could think of. And we could put it on its feet, and share it with each other, and then give feedback. And that whole, like—it, it just brought everyone in that, in that community really really close. And like, the reason why I'm having this interview, is because of that theater group, because someone I met from there was—or—was—knows someone over here, and so like, now, like, a lot of, like—yeah, that's, that's great how—through theater, through art, through something like that, can like—connect you to so many different people. So. Yeah.

Maya: That's beautiful. It sounds like theater, and performance, is also a space of vulnerability for you?

Pelton: Mmhmm.

Maya: As much as it is strength? Uh, would you agree?

Pelton: Yes.

Maya: Yeah.

Pelton: Um—I—get really nervous, before, like, performance, it like—I have to, like, push myself, to like, perform. And like, in front of people. Like, to sing in front of people, to—even if it's, like, two people, like, to like, sit down, and like, if, like, there's a piano there, like, I'm not gonna just sit down in a room of people and start playing the piano and singing. Even though I can. Because I just—I don't know. Like, it just makes me, it, I, I just get scared, I a little bit anxious, like, I don't know, like what if someone doesn't like the way I sound, and they, like, say it verbally? Like, to me, like, that's—like, your art is also, like, the things—things that you create, is like, when you're expression is so—so sacred, like, you wanna protect it, you know? Or like, when, like, your art is, like, yeah. Is like, things you create, is like—it's like a baby. You wanna, like, protect your baby. [laughter] So yeah.

Maya: Mmhmm, that's really good. So—you're also involved in organizations—

Pelton: Yeah.

Maya: Right? Can you tell me more about those?

Pelton: Um, right now I'm a co-facilitator of the TransGenerational Theatre Project. Um, we're basically a—multi-generational theater group, that—brings together—people of—all genders, or all—genders, or lack of genders, or full of genders, that there are, um—and—bring them together into a space where we can create theater about the way we are perceived, about the way we view the world, it's basically—um—it's very similar to CAT Youth Theater in the way, in the, the structure, of what it is, like, the way that we're running the theater group is very, is very similar, like it's a, there's lots of, like—circles, where you're like, looking at everyone in the room, and there's lots of, like, activities that bring people together, and—so, it's—like, to create a space of community, within the trans community, within New York City. Especially, like, multi-generational, because, for me, like—a lot of, like, trans people didn't get to live past the age of 35—

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: Or, like—a lot of trans people die young, and, like—highest rate of suicide, like, highest murder rate, like all these things—are—scary, and—to meet trans people who are older, who've been through Stonewall, who've marched in, like, 20, 30, 40 pride parades, like, stuff like that is really beautiful. Honestly I don't know how many pride parades there are. I'll probably sound dumb if there are less than 40. Anyway, um. But, like, that's—really powerful for me, to, to interact with them. And the other thing is like, originally, I started off as, like—as a member of, like, I was a participant? And—

Maya: In the TransGenerational—

Pelton: Theatre Project, because, um—the creators, it was originally for, like, um, their thesis project?

Maya: Mmhmm. Who are the creators?

Pelton: Um—Christian Appel, Lenni [omitted], and Amanda Thompson.

Maya: Okay.

Pelton: Um—and it was for their thesis project. An MA for their masters in applied theater. And, so—it was like—was—I was originally a participant because, like, the, this is what they had to do, but, like, they always said, like, felt that way, like, we wouldn't have been able to, like—get as much stuff done without you, and all this stuff, so the next year they made me an actual facilitator. And—that has been really, really interesting, and very very—fun—experience, and also, like, one that has really caused me to grow a lot more than in, like, the past—since I started, like, it was something that—I was asked to do, and I committed to the entire time, and—I grappled with, I had hard times, I had—really really great times, and—like, where I am now, mentally, and—mature—maturity? Mature—The way I've matured from this experience, has um—I don't know, it's—created a—not only like, a circle that's very, like, supportive, but, like, I feel more confident, and I feel—very empowered, and like my voice matters, and my opinion matters, and the things that I have, I have more to contribute to the world than—just—the art that I can create. I can also help people learn how to create their own art, and that's something that's—it's amazing! Yeah.

Maya: How long have you been a part of the project?

Pelton: The project is like two years old, so last year, um—20—16?

Maya: Mmhmm.

Pelton: Was the first—iteration? Is that the word I'm looking for?

Maya: Mmhmm.

Pelton: Of the TransGenerational Theatre Project, and then this was the second year.

Maya: So last year you were a participant, this year you're a facilitator.

Pelton: Yeah. And—it was—a weird position to be in, like. I don't know if I mentioned, but I was, like, the youngest person in the room.

Maya: Yeah?

Pelton: Um. So—that was—weird at first.

Maya: Can you tell me more about that? Like what was the age dynamic for you?

Pelton: So there are people of—lots of different ages there. Like, elders, um—like, older folk, um, there's like, people in like their thirties, and people in their twenties, but like, I'm—we, we used to have a couple more, like, young people in the project, last year there was more young people,

but this year's a little bit older, so I'm 21 and I was the youngest person in the room. That entire time.

Maya: Would the oldest be like 60?

Pelton: The oldest was probably in their seventies?

Maya: Seventies.

Pelton: I don't really know how old, um, exactly, but—um—but it's, it's beautiful, to be able to—to work with people who are older, and—help that, help shape them, you know? In ways, that, that, I didn't know I could, like—it doesn't really matter what age you are, you can learn new things, like—in—at any age, you know, it doesn't really matter. So that was my—it really helped teach me. It also helped me, like, like, curb—like—not curb but like really get in contact with, like, my concept of ageism.

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: And—what that's—like. Or, and adultism, like both, like—like—stereotyping, or thinking about older people in a certain way, whether that's positive or negative, and the way I'm perceived by older people, like, both were put in check, through this experience, because—I'm at a place where I'm facilitating, I'm, like, directing, and I'm—kind of like teaching people who are older than me how to—do something that—like I have more experience—at, like, even as, like, a young person, so like it really does put into perspective all the arguments I've had with people about, like, “Oh you're only, like, this old, you don't really know what you're talking about,” like, a lot of that stuff was always very frustrating for me, because I was someone who's—I love researching things, like if I'm interested in something, like, I'm going to learn about it, as much as I can, and, like, obsess. Like—for example when I—I don't know what it started with, but like—I became obsessed with snakes. And like, now I have six. Some of them need new homes—[laughter]—but—I have six. And they're like, they're my literal comfort animal.

Maya: Mmhmm.

Pelton: Like, and I didn't really realize that until, like, I just—took the time to research and stuff like that. So—knowledge is—power? [laughter] I dunno who said that, but—

Maya: What sort of ageist, um—stereotypes, I suppose, did people in the project, or other—participants—have about you?

Pelton: Oh, I think that, I think ageism is like—

Maya: Or—what is it?

Pelton: Adultist?

Maya: Is it, is it—

Pelton: Adult—

Maya: Is it when—

Pelton: Adultist is like, someone who's—like, if you get crap for being younger—

Maya: Okay.

Pelton: And ageism is if you're like, it—for people that—

Maya: Okay. So what did you—what crap did you get for being younger?

Pelton: Um, I have ADHD.

Maya: Mmhmm?

Pelton: So—sometimes my focus isn't where it needs to be, and—me being a younger person, like—it kind of like, seems like, it comes across sometimes as immaturity—

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: And so there was—I mean now I'm, like, able to, like—that actually helped me a lot, to, like, get that in check. But—I remember there was one times where someone asked me, like, “Oh can you slow down?” Like, we were doing an, like an across the room activity, so I was like, “Cross the room if you like the color orange,” and then people who like the color orange would cross the room. But I kept giving up prompts before people actually got to the other side, 'cause I was getting excited.

Maya: Mmhmm.

Pelton: And I was thinking, like, faster than, like—I realized the situation was going on, and so like, people kept correcting me.

Maya: Mmhmm?

Pelton: And, like, participants were doing it, and like, it was only, like, maybe like five times.

Maya: Yeah?

Pelton: But like, yes, five times is a bunch, but like, it was to the point where I just, like—the thing that made me, like—realize that I need to, like, be more consistent, and—with—what I'm doing, or like—listen to what everyone's saying better, or—I don't know. Wait for people to get to the other side of the room before giving the next prompt. But, like, people were like, “Wait—okay now go.”

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: And, like, it was like, to the point where it was, like, condescending. And it was like, I know what I'm doing, I'm the one facilitating this—this activity. But, yes, I do, my brain is thinking a little bit faster than the room is moving, and I apologize, I need to, like, take a step back and like—notice what I'm, what's going on. And like, focus on what's—on the situation that's happening. Um—but that's—I don't think you can, I don't blame anyone, like I don't blame, like, the people who are saying things, 'cause they were only trying to be helpful. But like—it—I think it comes from like a—like, they see that I'm younger, and like, oh this person could use my help, even as

a participant, and—yeah, at the moment, when I was like, very, I was—moody at the time, I was really, I was like kind of, really really pissed, I was like, I know what I'm doing. Like, stop. Like I don't know why you're telling me what to do, like I know what I'm doing, I'm a facilitator oh my god! [laughter] Yeah, so. That was that.

Maya: What preconceptions did you have about people who were older?

Pelton: That—ooh. You know—that people who are older are automatically more wise, or know more than you, or—have more life experience. And—it made me realize that just because you've been around, you've traveled around the sun, and back to the same point a couple of times, doesn't mean that—you know more than people who have had less rotations around the sun. I don't know, it's like, yes, with age, with, like, the older you get, the more you learn, and the more life experience you have, but like—sometimes, if someone—if someone's life is so focused on a certain type of experience, for example if I was like, only focused on dance, and I was a dancer, and that's all I did, like, I wouldn't have—I wouldn't have done as many things as I've done. Because I've taken the time to, like, do other things, and be versatile. So like, sometimes—I expect people to know more than they do. And, that's like, kind of like—

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: Then I have to, like, backtrack, and I'm like wait, let me—let me reevaluate what I'm, what I'm thinking right now. So.

Maya: Did you connect with any of the older folks?

Pelton: Oh gosh, so many of them. Um—I just loved to hear their stories. There, there are so many—amazing people who I've met through this. Like people who, who—some of the older folks are connected to. Um. And—ooh! Good, gosh, um. [laughter] A lot of people in the project, like, yes I am younger, so they, they do feel very protective of me, and like, they're very happy for me when, like, I—when I get to, like, new stages in my life, or when, like, new things happen, so—yeah. Um. And it's—it's very nice.

Maya: Do you keep in contact with any of them?

Pelton: Yeah definitely! Um, I do. I speak to a lot of them. Um. I mean, I—I, we're currently doing, um—a performance for the Trans—the Trans Theater Festival? Trans—festival—

Maya: I don't know what it's called.

Pelton: Trans Theater festival—um—it's happening, um, next week, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday.

Maya: Where?

Pelton: At the Brick Theater. Or. The Brick. It's a theater, in Williamsburg, near Metropolitan, on the G, M, or around the L.

Maya: Wow. How long has that been going on for, do you know?

Pelton: I have no clue.

Maya: The—okay.

Pelton: But I do know it's supposed to be, like, a—whole bunch of, like, amazing queer artists, making—and, like, gender non-conforming artists, like—

Maya: Wow.

Pelton: And, like, to me anyone who's gender non-conforming or trans is like family, because—there are certain experiences that all of us have to, that all of us, not necessarily have to, but all of us have—endured. Like, misgendering. Like I'm not sure if everyone has been misgendered, but I feel like a lot of people who are trans or gender non-conforming have been misgendered, and—stuff like that kind of, like, it—it's like, that feeling, on an emotional level, that you just kind of, like, know more about somebody, like, just from, like, their experience, or just from the way they identify. And it—it brings you closer to a lot more people.

Maya: Do you find that that's been true for you? That you feel that instant community or connection when you meet other, like, trans or queer folk?

Pelton: Oh yeah.

Maya: Yeah?

Pelton: Whenever—whenever I, like, see someone, on, in like, public, who I can, like, assume like, wow that person looks, like, pretty—pretty family, [laughter] like, looks pretty awesome, looks pretty—pretty queer, and like, I just love that. Or like when someone, like—is very androgynous, like, I just—I—I love seeing that in other people, because it makes me feel like I'm not alone. You know? Especially in public. And it's hard for people to live authentically, dress authentically, and be themselves, their—their true selves in public. That's something that I'm still dealing with as someone who is gender-fluid, and is at a place where I'm more gender-full than gender-less at times. And—that can give me a little bit of anxiety. Like, if I don't shave, like, as often as someone who's had to go—testosterone in their body, like, I have to shave a little bit more often than some cis men—aha—stutter—some cis women might have to, um, but—yeah. So like, sometimes I, like, I get lazy, and I don't shave, and then I become a little bit more gender-full than gender-less because, like, there are certain things that are, like, I realize that are more androgynous, or—more—gender suggestive than others. For example, like, facial hair—

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: Or, um—like, the ways, like, proportions —

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: Of your body, or the way, like, certain things are shaped, and, or like, different even, like, what clothes you wear, and it's—that's something that I've learned to, like—I'm learning to master the art form of now. Like that's an art form to me, is like, learning how to fully express yourself, you know? Like there are people who've mastered, like, how to dress themselves and what they look good in and how comfortable they feel, you know, when they feel really confident,

but I'm still finding, like, clothes that make me feel super confident, super powerful, and I think that's something that—that's really, like, the way you express yourself to the world, um, is—is powerful. It says a lot about who you are as a person. And—if you're able to communicate to the world, silently, um—your confidence in yourself, in your gender, in—your authenticity, um, that's like super awesome, and that's what I'd like to be able to do, is—be able to, like, have the world view me, like, the way I feel I, I should be viewed. Yeah.

Maya: What clothing items or accessories, etcetera, make you feel powerful?

Pelton: Ooh. I love, um, clothing that is, like, really androgynous, like I could give to anyone to wear, and they'd look like, practically the same in it. You know. So for me, like—tee shirts, but that, that are like, like longer tee shirts, to me, are like, things that, like, anyone can wear, but like you can—certain things that you can, like, femme out, or, like, make it more masculine depending on how you style it, and so those things make me feel really powerful, is—when—I don't know. When I, when I, I mean—for me, makeup makes me feel—makes me feel very powerful, like when I—feel like I got, I do certain things like contour, or the way I do my makeup to, like, curb certain—um, dysphoria—

Maya: Mhmm?

Pelton: Things, or like, things I dislike about—not dislike, but things that like, kind of like make me nervous about my face. Um, and—it's, it's a—it makes me feel very powerful when I look like myself. Like, I hadn't always been able to, that's weird, yeah. I haven't always been able to recognize my reflection. Like growing up, the, like the, the voice that I spoke with in my head, and the voice that I spoke with my actual vocal chords, if that makes sense, was—were, like, completely different. And it was—difficult, 'cause I was like, what's going on, why, why does my—inner voice sound different than—and I thought they should sound the same. Like, and that was something that, like, I always wanted, is for them to sound the same. Yeah.

Maya: Do you have a specific—power outfit? Like, from head to toe, like—

Pelton: Ooh, a specific power outfit. I really like, like, the edgy kind of look. Like, for me, like, a specific power outfit is like a perfectly androgynous outfit that's like not quote-unquote “offensive” to anyone, that you could just wear, and like anyone would be like wow, that person looks really nice in what they're wearing. And I think there are a lot of garments like that. Like, a black shirt, and, like, nice jeans, and a cardigan, and—a messenger bag, or something like that, can be styled and—worn, depending on how you wear it, in so many different ways that—it can change the way, like—the power, or, the way you feel. So. That's.

Maya: You used a term before, um, earlier. You said gender-full.

Pelton: Gender-full, yeah.

Maya: And I would love to hear kind of your definition of that term.

Pelton: Um—ooh. It, it's like—I've had times where I felt genderless, and that's when, there are things that, like—like, babies are androgynous. So things that I—hat, like, in my brain, that are

more, like, less developed, like, before puberty, before, like, the—the things that really do end up gendering us—

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: Um, kick in, there are things that like, that are very, that are—genderless. So like nipples are genderless. Eyes are genderless, noses are genderless, lips are genderless, like, there are a lot of different aspects of—of someone's appearance that are genderless, that everyone has. Like arms are genderless, you know. But there are some things that are very, like, gender-full. Like facial hair, or like, the way that you, if you wear, like, body hair can be like a very gender-full thing, like, I don't—if you don't shave your legs, but you are a very feminine person, that can end up looking very gender-full.

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: Or, but like, if you do shave your legs, and you're a very masculine person, that can look very, a little more genderless, so, like, it just depends on—yeah.

Maya: Yeah, I like that. Where do you feel the safest?

Pelton: Ooh. Um—with headphones on.

Maya: With headphones on.

Pelton: Yeah.

Maya: So anywhere—with headphones on.

Pelton: I mean—for me, like, surrounded by music. Or surrounded by art. Or like, in a place where—or like, around other queer people. [laughter] Um. Yeah. Or sleep—asleep? Yes! Asleep, in bed. Or eating food. But sometimes that can be, like, scary. 'Cause if I'm like eating by myself—I feel like if I'm being watched, it's like, weird for me, I don't know.

Maya: Interesting. [laughter] Why do you think that is?

Pelton: I don't know. I, I feel like there's, like—I have a—ah—I don't know, maybe I have a—I don't know. 'Probably 'cause I need therapy. [laughter] And I don't really know what my, my relationship with food is like. I haven't really discussed it in a way that I can vocalize properly. But—I have, like, a weird relationship with food. Like I—know I—it would be extremely hard for me to get, like, overweight, or to get, like, to like, gain, like, a lot of weight, 'cause I've tried, and it's been extremely difficult for me to gain weight. But then also I've, I feel like that partially is like—I get anxiety eating in public, 'cause I'm like, people are gonna look at me like, oh, look at that person eating by themselves, they have no friends, like I don't know what they're thinking about me, and like, that's like—it's so lame. Not lame, that's an [inaudible] word, it's so—silly to think about, because—'why—why do you need to worry about people watching you eat? Like yeah.

Maya: Yeah. You talked about—you mentioned earlier the, the idea of the—art of navigation.

Pelton: Mhmm.

Maya: Can you elaborate?

Pelton: On the navigation? Or—

Maya: Yeah, when you—like, I think you meant social spaces, like, people who know how to dress themselves, or—

Pelton: Oh.

Maya: Or know how to work spaces around—

Pelton: Okay, yeah. That's, like, finding your—your voice, or—your, your niche that makes, that you excel at, or that you're knowledgeable, or that makes you feel confident and powerful. Like there are spaces, or, like, things that like, like for me, when I'm speaking about music, I feel a lot more confident than if I'm speaking about math, because music to me is a little bit easier, like I, my brain understands music a little bit easier than math. But sometimes, like, I've had times where like people have explained music in the mathematical sense, where now I'm like, woah, you just bridged a gap kind of, and I need to, like, focus on how to bridge this gap more often, but, um—yeah. What would—what was that question again?

Maya: We have the—art of navigation.

Pelton: Yeah! Some people are able to navigate the world, um—like, the art of navigation, of, like, social spaces, is like, sometimes you have to put on—you have to carry yourself a certain way, um—in certain spaces. Like you can't always—like, if you always look angry, or if you always put on, like, a very, like “I'm upset” or like, “I'm intimidating” persona, that's like, eventually that's probably how you're going to really think of yourself, you know? Um—and—there are people who are able to move through spaces, and the world, without any problems. Like a lot of the time, like, cis people, or, like, I've noticed cis people more often, are, are more comfortable navigating social spaces, because they don't have the boundaries of—worrying about your gender. Or—don't have to, the boundaries of—for example some people don't have the boundaries of worrying about how they're perceived race-wise, or—

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: You know? So some people are—maybe it has to do with some of the privilege, too. But some people, like, are able to navigate the world—in a way that seems, at least in my eyes, less difficult than the way I had to teach myself how to navigate the world. I had to, like, make it into an art form, and some people it's a lot more natural.

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: Um—and so like, the way you dress, and the way you speak, and the way you walk, and the way you carry yourself, are all—things that can boost or—bring down your confidence. And—so you have to find the things that, like, boost your confidence, and make you feel more sound, and more—I guess authentic. 'Cause like, for me, like, authenticity is something that's really important to me. Is like, remaining authentic, and—how you, like—remaining true to yourself,

you know? Like, if I know I'm never going to be the traditional—like, common, or whatever I want to call, like, the normal definition of “a man.” Because I never identified with that. And it might have taken some time to fully realize that, but like, I—when you do realize, like, your relationship with yourself, I guess, that's—something that's always super powerful. Or that's something that really is—it's eye-opening. It's really awakening.

Maya: When did you realize, um—maybe realize is not the right word, but when did you start becoming aware of, uh—your relationship to yourself?

Pelton: Um—I remember—to be honest, it was in seventh grade, when I was a part of the Knick City Kids, I—that was when I started self-harming.

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: And that was a time in my life that was extremely happy—like, outwardly, you know? Like, I had to—go on stage and smile and dance and, like, even if I messed up, keep going, and like stuff like that, and then backstage, like, I didn't always get along with all the people, all the other people on the team. Like I was—I was—when you're younger, like, queerness is read as weakness in some ways. So, for me, someone who is perceived as male, who is very feminine, and—wasn't, and wasn't always the most confident in the way I spoke or, like, way I looked, um—like people could pick up on that, you know? Or like, there were things, like, I didn't, like—my ADHD wasn't like exactly like, diagnosed, until, like, I was a lot older, so like, I didn't really understand that I had ADHD, so like there were things that I would do that I thought were like hilarious or funny that no one else did, or like, there were like, social things that I had to learn how to maneuver, um—and it was weird. Like I, like, for me, like I've always had, like, dysphoria around, like, my bottom half. And, um—I remember, like, I was trying on costumes, and like there was like a jumpsuit, like an overall jumpsuit that I had to wear, and it came, like, way too high, like, in the crotch area. And I remember I would not stand up straight. Like I would not. Like—he was like just stand up, it's fine, like, you know, we have to, like, figure out, like what, how it actually, like, where the actual length is, and I was like, I can't do that. And like I didn't realize that was because like I had, like, dysphoria, or it was about, like, my gender. And so now looking back, like, it's—if I had a stronger relationship with myself, or—a more positive relationship with myself, I wouldn't have—gone home—like, the times where I felt weak or vulnerable or angry about situations that happened, or, about, like, 'cause it was also, like, a very awkward phase. Like I didn't understand, like, what deodorant worked, like, there were a lot of different things, like I was, like, I was lanky, I was getting taller, I was going through puberty which involved testosterone, which I didn't really understand why that felt so disgustingly wrong to me, and like now that I'm older, like, I realize there were things that were changing, that I really, really, disliked the way they were changing, like, the way my face was shaped, the way my voice sounded, I was getting facial hair, I didn't want facial hair, um, like, my legs were getting hairy, like, there were things that, like—that were like—yeah. So—I—eventually I, I learned how to—have a better relationship. I, it—it took a lot of practice. To—know myself. And to realize, like, who I was. 'Cause I remember in sixth grade I did, I did have that moment of like, looking in the mirror, like, and I remember, like, “I'm gay.” And, like looking in the mirror and, like, saying that. And like, dying of laughter. 'Cause of like, psh, that's not, like, [laughter] that doesn't, like, sound accurate to me,

it just doesn't, like, suit me. And then, like, I, like I really, like, looked, and I was like—maybe I'm a girl. I'm a girl. And I was like ooh. Let's keep that. Let's—let's [laughter] let's put that back to the, the subconscious, nope. [laughter] We're not gonna—address that right now. And then, it wasn't until later that I realized that that was actually, like, a moment, that I really became closer to myself. Was when I, like, in the back of my mind knew that I was trans, but didn't have a way of expressing it, or didn't have the vocabulary to, um, say that was, or, it didn't seem like a priority.

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: I guess that was another thing. Like there were other things that I had to focus on, like, trying to, like, do well in school, and if I had—if I was doing perfectly well, like—there were like so many things, like—if I was like, if I was—a perfect student, and, like, so many other things, like, being trans wouldn't have affected me as—like, in the same way, because I would have, it, I wouldn't have had to focus on so much, you know? So like, my brain, I get scatter-brained very easily, um—I don't know if people can hear it when I speak, but like, sometimes, like, I don't always remember what I just said, because my brain is traveling, like, 50 times faster than my mouth can actually speak. So—I lose thoughts very easily. They, like, just kind of just like, they keep going, and I'm like uh—I really wanted to, like, finish the sentence, but I don't know where it went. [laughter] Yeah. So. Things like learning that about myself, was like—yeah.

Maya: You said you had to practice, um—developing a relationship with yourself.

Pelton: Yeah.

Maya: What sort of things did you do?

Pelton: Um—for me, it was—I had to, like—like—the way I dressed—was—I wanted to dress, certain, I wanted to look, I wanted to be styled in certain ways, I wanted to appear, like, stylish, and like the—what, the things that, I thought, looked good, were different, on me, were different than how, I guess, my mom thought things should look on me. So like, there were things, like I really wanted to wear skinny jeans, I really wanted to wear, like—I went with the, wanted the, like there was a certain look that I really really wanted, but my mom was like, “Those look like leggings. They're too feminine.” They're, like, things like that. And, like—my mom of course didn't realize that, like, now I would call it, like, gender policing, or like stuff like that, where like someone is telling you that—what's natural to you isn't actually natural, or isn't what you're supposed to—want yourself to look like. Yeah.

Maya: Hmm. Um—As of now, how do you understand your gender?

Pelton: Um. It's fluid.

Maya: Fluid?

Pelton: Um, my name is Jarrett'Kai. And the Kai part, the definition that, the first definition I saw was ocean.

Maya: Mmhmm.

Pelton: Um, and—that was the one that kinda just stuck with me. Because I felt like Kai is, like, I'm—an ocean of gender. Full of gender. And then there are some places that are like oceans of, like—no gender, you know, where it's just, like—yeah. Maybe, like, gender's like—maybe my expression is like, the water itself, and like—saltwater is, like, one side of my gender, and like, fresh water is like another side of my gender. Like I don't know. Like maybe it's like that. Um. But there are—just—yeah. I—Fluid [laughter]. Water. That's how I kinda define my gender now.

Maya: Hmm. What were you like as a child?

Pelton: I was a very—hyper, very happy—kid. You know. I'd have, like, weird sayings, like “a monkey in a haystack.” I would—I specifically remember I'd say that, and just add it on to the end of things. Like, you know. “Oh my god that's so funny, it made me laugh like a monkey in a haystack.” Like it just—I don't remember where those things came from, but like—yeah. So I had like a—I was a weird kid. I was really weird. I was super queer. And I remember, like, like, counselors, like, growing up, like, counselors in camp, or like certain teachers, like—they were probably queer themselves, and like knew I was queer, and they, they kind of like, kind of like, were very protective of me, because I was very clearly, like, not—like every other kid. You know, like, my interests were different, the way I carried myself was different—yeah.

Maya: How were you different? Like, specifically?

Pelton: So for most, like—um, children who would be perceived as male, like I was a lot more feminine. Um, the way I spoke was more feminine. Like I remember growing up, like, when people didn't know me they'd, they'd say, like, “Why do you talk like a girl?”

Maya: Hmm!

Pelton: And I never really understood like what they meant. But like, it was the inflections of my voice, or the way I—I—phrased certain words, you know? Um—and like—I remember, like, the moment I learned how to, like, speak like a guy. Like how—like my voice, like when like my voice went to like—this has actually, like, made it deep enough for me to, like—switch it down to like a different voice, and then I have to like learn how to control that, which was basically—that was great. 'Cause now I know like there's, like, this voice, and then there's this voice and I can speak in either one. Like. Yeah.

Maya: Wow.

Pelton: Also as a singer I thought it'd be really helpful. Definitely, like, affected my range a lot more [laughter]. So yeah.

Maya: Um—Did you go to school? You mentioned performing but you haven't mentioned—you said high school, but like, what kind of high schools?

Pelton: Oh. I went to, um—Brooklyn School for—of Collaborative Studies. Um—it's a—a [inaudible] learning school. Um, based in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn. Like—near—the bridge to Red Hook. Um. Originally, I went to private school.

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: Um—and I went to private school for ten years, before switching to a public school. Um. And I just remember—the culture shock. And the difference in the way I was perceived, and the way—

Maya: What was different?

Pelton: So, like—in private school, I'd been there my whole life. So like everyone knew me, and no one had a problem with the way I was.

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: Because we all, like—kind of grew up together. And like even kids who were new, like, there were already kids who had known me since I was, from, like, from very young, and we were already very close, and so—for example, um—sorry. For example, there were—like, when I moved to public school, like, the question that I got asked the most was, “Are you gay?”

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: You know? And no one cared, in my—in my other school. No one, like. Cared. They were like, “Are you gay?” That was literally the first thing that people would always ask me. And I was like, “No?” And I would always say that, because I didn't really understand that like—I'm not gay, I'm—I'm trans. But like, that's, like—a whole other thing. Um—but I didn't really understand why that was so important to people. You know? Like there were people who literally would not sit next to me, who wouldn't be around me, who would avoid me at all costs, because they thought my gayness, or my queerness, would rub off on them. And it did. And—that's fine. But, like, it rubbed off in a very productive way. So that's a—productive way. I did. [laughter] Sorry.

Maya: Earlier you mentioned this idea of authenticity.

Pelton: Yeah.

Maya: And what does it mean to be authentic, to you?

Pelton: It means to—not question the—the things that feel, like—fundamentally right.

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: You know. And—even if that's, like. There are some people who, like—to them, hunting feels right. Like that's something they need to do, or like something like tracking animals, or like some people—photography feels really, really right, that leads them to their—their authenticity. Some people like the color black—feels way more, they feel way more connected to wearing black, or just the color the black, than they do to orange, or yellow, or green, or like a neon color, because like that's just—part of their authenticity. So I just feel like whatever—speaks to you, or speaks to your character, speaks to your existence, speaks to your soul, that's—those are the things that you need to—fill your life with. To make your life authentic. So like for me that's like—femininity. And the way I was perceived, masculine-ly or feminine-ly, was—very important to my authenticity, because I felt like my masculinity was a mask that I wore. Um. And it was—very difficult, because I didn't realize that like—I—I remember most—'Cause like—my, my brother's cis, and straight, from—what I know. Even though technically [laughter] I shouldn't say this, but

like—my brother dated someone who now identifies as trans. And so like they—they were—and so—technically, you know, they brought a guy home before I did. You know. Just sayin' [laughter]. Um—but my, my brother is straight and cis. And so I modeled myself, for a lot of my childhood, after my brother because I thought, like, “That is how a boy is supposed to be. Like if I'm going, if I'm a boy, I have to be like my brother.” So like I'd, like—I remember his friends would call me little Ian. Because that's his name, so his name's Ian. But, like—I looked like a little Ian. So then they'd just call me that, so that's like—so you know having a brother, I had—something to compare myself to, to aspire to be more like, so I can be accepted by society. Because the way my brother maneuvered the world, to me, was—way—simpler than, like—what I felt, like, like I had to think about. You know? Like I had to think about the fact that, like, the way I laughed, or like the way I ran, like, I ran with my arms—I run like Velma, like, sometimes. And, like, my mom was like, “Why are you running like that? Like, like what—what is this? What are you doing?” Or, like, “Why are you wearing your pants so tight?” And I'm like, “But why doesn't it look, like, the way it looks like on my brother? Then it looks like, they're like—why do they look so tight on me? Like why do—what is going on?” So like there were just, like, things that—yeah. That were different.

Maya: When did you—start breaking out of that mold? Uh—

Pelton: When—I—learned—I realized—So I, I think it was—I don't know. When I first, my first, um—my introduction to anything, like, not cis, or anything genderless, was, like—drag.

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: Like RuPaul's Drag Race.

Maya: When was this?

Pelton: Like I remember—I don't remember exactly how old I was, but I remember going on a field trip, and someone pointing at, at the billboard. And like, “Woah, aren't they pretty?” And I was like, “Yeah. I think they all look amazing. Like, like their makeup and their hair is, like, styled very very specifically, and I think it looks great.” And—and then it was like, “So like they're hot?” I'm like, “Yeah, they're all, like, super hot. They're so cool.” And they're like, “Oh. Well they're all men.” And I'm like—“They still look good to me. Like, I'm sorry. Like, that they—that, that you feel, like—deceived, or surprised.” But like—to me it's just like, they look like people to me. And whatever they're wearing is still what they're wearing. So like—it was—it wasn't that big a—like, queerness wasn't as big of a deal to me. You know. That was, like—I didn't really get—why I had to, like—I guess, like, I never understood why I had to act or present myself in a certain way that seemed more cis, or more straight. Um—I never understood why, but I—I knew that that would make me—I guess—it would make my life easier. Or I'd be able to maneuver the world—better. Or I'd be able to find—like, work easier. Or like stuff like that. Because there—there isn't something that's different about me, for people to look past, you know? I'm already a person of color, I'm already, like—whatever else, I'm already perceived as certain ways, and so why would I add on anything else to that? To—that's like, how, like—

Maya: Mhmm?

Pelton: Pack on my—And I realized that that was probably 'cause like—that's kind of somewhat the mindset of my parents had. Like why would you add anything, like if you—if you're already, you—there are already things about you, that—that people, or society, can—try—or will try and use against you, why add anything else?

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: To that. And so that's how it was, like, I just need to be, like—passing in more ways than, like—I just have to be like, I can—I can just, like, pass as a guy. I'm just a regular dude, you know? One of the guys. I'd like, what—every birthday, like, I'd go see a superhero movie, which, um—I never wanted to see. And I'd invite all the guys in, like, my grade, like all the—all the guys that I thought were cool. Um—well now I realize I probably thought they were attractive then, I just didn't really—understand the vocabulary of what that was. Um. But like, so I'd invite all, like—the popular, who I thought was like really cool and popular to—to the movie, and to come up and have a sleepover after, and like I remember, like—not everyone would sleep over, like I remember some people were like, “No, I'm not gonna sleep over.” I don't know what—what their parents—what that was like, but—I just remember that was—kind of like a—a big deal for me. Was, like—I need to be perceived as, like, a cool guy. You know? And then I broke out of that. And it was like—I'm just—a human? Like there's nothing that I have to do besides what feels right. And all I have to do is express what—I'm, I—what's inside. You know? Like, express the beauty that's inside. You know? Like everyone has it.

Maya: What age do you feel like you broke out—of that?

Pelton: Hmm. I realized I was queer—like, queer queer—like in sixth grade.

Maya: Sixth grade.

Pelton: And that's kind of like when it started—you know, that was when I—I remember someone asked me if I was bi.

Maya: Mmm.

Pelton: And I was like—like, “Heck no! Like of course not!” And they were like, “Why, do you have a problem with that?” And I was like “I guess not, I—I don't.” Like it was—and immediately switch, it was like, oh I—I just thought that that's what I'm supposed to feel like. No, I'm not, like. And I'm like, maybe I am. And then—that went to, like, maybe I'm gay. And then it was like, wait, maybe I'm not gay, maybe I'm trans, or, like, maybe I'm just, like, a gender-fluid kind of person, and maybe like I don't really care about, um—like—the person, or, like—what their—how they're perceived by society, or what their gender—what—what they're going through, maybe it's like certain aspects of people's personalities. And so—it just evolved over time, but I know like the starting point was in sixth grade, when I definitely looked in the mirror, and like—had, like, a moment with myself. Where I'm like—who are, like—what are you? Like who are you? What—what is going on with you? You know? And—yeah. And that's when I started talking to myself and became absolutely crazy—I'm kidding. [laughter] Um. Yeah.

Maya: When did you first hear the word trans?

Pelton: Ooh! Ooh! I don't remember! Wow, that's a good—I actually remember—ooh—I didn't know, I knew what a sex change was!

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: Like that was like the first, like—

Maya: How old were you?

Pelton: I was young!

Maya: Mmm.

Pelton: I remember—I was reading a—no, I was in the—the playground, in like—I think it was like one, like, my first day of school, or like, something like that. And there were like—babysitters, and someone was reading a book, and someone in the book had a sex change, and they, like—were saying that, like, “We're gonna have a sex change!” And like all the stuff. And like, in the back of my mind I knew what that was, but I was like, “Hmm, a sex change, that's cool, like people can do that, people—I didn't know.” And then I remember watching something later on in life called, um—it was Thumb Wars, and, like, Thumbtanic?

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: And I remember, like, there was a part in Thumbtanic where, like—the ship was sinking. And they were like, um—like, “Get your sex change! Get your sex change! You can't go—you can't be saved or go on a lifeboat if you're a man!” And so like, he would just go and like, like, just—shing! And, like—that was, like, what I thought it was. Like it was just, like, brutal, like—castration. Like, that's like, what I, like, I thought, like—trans adults—that was like my first concept of trans-ness. And then I realized it was like, no, there—then YouTube.

Maya: Hmm. Then YouTube.

Pelton: Mmm. YouTube, my gosh. And I was like oh! There are actual people who, like—don't gender! Or just gender—however they want! And I'm like—woah. Like—you can do that? Like that's a thing? Like—you can just create yourself, and be whatever you wanna be? And your own person? Oh but I can't do that at home, I have to wait until I get older. So like, that was something that, like—I was waiting for so long. Like, I had to like, that was something, another part of, like—being queer, with me, is like patience. Like—I would—[laughter]—like my, most of my life it's been patience for me. Like, and I, it feels like to a lot of people that I'm rushing things, at this point in my life, but I'm just at a point where, like, everything can just happen, like what I—when, like, I have the resources to have things happen now. Like it's not like I'm impatient, it's like—I was so patient for so long, and now I can, like, fully, like—be the person I feel like I am, and that I want to be. And that's just, like, really really great I can talk like this! And, like, say like, “Hi, my name is Kai! And my pronouns are she/her, they/them, and I like turtles!” Like that's something I can do now! Before it was like, “Um—my name is Jarrett, and—um—I'm a guy.” Like that was, like the—that was it. Like it was—yeah. I also like the way I felt the world, like, that—

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: I feel, like—energies and stuff. Like a lot people's, like, different energies. Like—I can feel people's emotions, like very, like—very strongly. So if someone's, like, having a hard time on the train, I can literally, like—physically feel that, and it's weird. Um—but like—so like—when I—was—going through what I consider testosterone poisoning, was—when I felt like it was disconnecting me. 'Cause like, as a child, I was so connected to—energy, and, like—healing, and like, all that stuff, like—I was way more spiritual as a child, you know? And now—like—like, at that point, it was like—now I have all this testosterone inside my body, and I didn't realize, but like, that was, like something that was, like—you can't cry. Like I was emotional—

Maya: Mmm.

Pelton: Like I didn't feel like I could express my emotions, I felt like my emotions were something that had to be acted out, and, like, calculated. So like, how I was perceived, like—I—you smile here. You frown here. You cry here. You laugh here. Like, that's just like how I was like, oh [laughter]. Like if everyone was laughing around me, I just like—oh, I laugh too now. Like I didn't really get how to—be a person. Like, and that's like why I'm like, now it's just all natural to me. Now I'm just, like—me. Like I don't have to really worry about, um—like how—I'm perceived. Or, like, what emotions I'm giving off, because I just feel them and they're just there. And so that was something that's—kind of awesome. So yeah.

Maya: When was the first time you came into contact with a—trans community?

Pelton: —

Maya: Any sort of trans community.

Pelton: Any sort of trans community?

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: I went to—no! There was a trans woman, her name was Honey, and she would stand outside the train station when I went—when I moved from private to public school. She'd stand outside the train station, and just, like, say hi to people, and was, like, really really nice, and so people would sometimes give her money, and some people just, would just, like—but she would just stand there. And, like, to me, like—I didn't realize—like, I knew, like, from seeing her that I was trans, like that just was like—like she called me girl before, like, anyone else.

Maya: Mhmm?

Pelton: She's like, “Okay girl!” Like—like, she knew. Like she could see it. And like, that was like—I'm pretty sure that was the first person who actually saw through—like, my, like—

Maya: Mhmm?

Pelton: The—the facade of masculinity that I put on. And then when I actually started to, like, transition in high school, socially, and started to dress like myself, and like got extensions, and wore makeup, and like—she was like, “Okay, I see you now! Like I see, like, you're like, you're you. I used to be just like you, I used to be so pretty.” And it was just—yeah. I feel like that was, that was someone, like—and, to me, like—that's someone who some people would look over,

and it's like oh that's just like, some, like, crazy—that's just like some homeless person, some crazy person. But no, she had a place to live, but she would stand there, and, to me, just show, like—I exist! Trans people exist, and we are nice people. Um—hey. Like that was, like, just the kind of energy that—she gave off. And that was something that—that was, like, the first person—or like my first real contact with, like, a trans person, that I could, like, actually speak to them. You know? And then later on, like, through CAT Youth Theater I met, um, Christian, who's gender non-conforming and trans. And I didn't know at the time. To, to me they were just, like—I—to me, it was, like—gay, and then, like, another level of gay that was, like—that was actually trans-ness, but I didn't understand. So like—I knew that there was, like—gayness, and, like, lesbian—like I just thought it was gay and lesbian, straight—like, gay, lesbian, straight, bi. And like that was it. And then, like, I didn't realize that, like—transgender, or like—trans was, like, another—like when I—I remember, like, on Facebook, when I, like, when people like started posting things about trans-ness where it was like, trans with the asterisk.

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: And like, what it means, you know. It's an umbrella term for this, this, this and this. And like, different genders, and like all this stuff. And I was like ooh. I like this. And then—yeah. I didn't realize how connected I was to the trans community until I got older. Like there was like someone, um—like, in my school's version of a GSA, it was called STEP, Students Together for Empowerment and Peace—there was someone who worked there, um—who was like an intern, in the, like, the guidance office. And—his name was Olan, um—he's awesome, um—and—he—he—like, I didn't know that he was trans, but, like, I remember, like, an article came out in the newspaper that like, in like, the Metro that they handed out—

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: And it was about like, a—I think like a lawsuit or something that he had won—

Maya: Hmm?

Pelton: Or something. I wasn't really sure exactly what the story was, but like—it outed him to everyone in the school. And I remember—

Maya: Oh.

Pelton: There was a meeting that day, at STEP, where he was like, “I'm not sure if any of you saw, but there was an article that—that said—that, that kind of, like, just outed me. So like yes, I am trans, I—like, this is blah blah blah.” And, like—I was like—“You weren't born with that beard?” Like that was, like, my first, like, reaction. And like, whenever I, like, meet a trans person who like—I just think, like, looks so, like—themselves, like I don't know, there's like a—there are some trans people who haven't really—found their—their—haven't really, like, fully developed their authenticity, or fully developed their, like, their sense of style. And it takes time, because you—it's like, you have to go through puberty, which is just, like, some awkward, like—like—real awkward, like—tadpole with leg phase, you know?

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: Like—or like, a chrysalis phase, that, that kind of, where you're really kind of like children don't really understand how to, like, maneuver. But then when you—your wings start to, like, bloom, and when your tail starts to recede back into your body and you start to hop around or flutter around like the butterfly or frog that you are, um, I just think it's—that's when, like, people can really truly, like, like just exude, like, the gender that they're meant to be. And—mm—it's—hard for people to do that. Like I don't think anyone that I've ever met is fully, like, complete, you know? Like no one's done transitioning, because we never stop changing.

Maya: Mmm.

Pelton: And I think that that's something that's kind of beautiful. Like people will be like, “Oh I'm pretty finished, like, transitioning.” I'm like no you're not. Like you're gonna learn new things, and you're gonna have different life experiences that are gonna change you, and are gonna make you feel that—wow, I cannot believe that at one point I thought I was done transitioning. Like I—definitely need to, like, reevaluate this part of my masculinity. Or, like, even if it's like that. Like 'cause I—that's another thing, like, I—I recently have met, like, a lot of trans men. Or like, just—just in life, I had never, like—been around trans-masculine or trans men before. Like as much. Like—I knew more about trans women, or, like, drag queens, but like—to me, like, trans-masculinism, like—the first, like, thing that was, like, even close was like—uh, what was it? Like a drag king.

Maya: Mhmm.

Pelton: And I didn't really understand, like, there were people who like feel really powerful in their masculinity. And like—then, like, I realized that no, like, trans-ness is, like—like, the gender spectrum goes both ways. Like the, there's like, the red the orange the yellow green blue indigo violet, like both—both sides. Like double rainbow. Double rainbows, like, face each other, you know? So like there's like a whole bunch of stuff. Um, but, like, yeah.

Maya: Mhmm?

Pelton: So I realize that there is, like, some—toxic masculinity that kind of leaks into—like, everyone's perception of gender. Um—or like, just like—the, just like the stereotypes. Like there are trans people who don't believe—who believe that there are only two genders, that there's only a binary, and that—there isn't anyone—that like people who differ are just, like, one or the other, like, truly, and like they just don't understand that. And there are people who are like no, gender's not a thing. Like, you can identify as any gender as you want, there are infinite genders. So like that—learning that, that there are people who, like, didn't—think the same way as I did, while still being trans, was really weird for me. That was another, like, culture shock.

Maya: Hmm.

Pelton: I talk a lot.

Maya: No, you're good! Um—[laughter]—what is—if, do you have any, like—let me back up. If there's one thing you would want people to know about you, in order for them to know you, what would it be?

Pelton: My literal aspiration, like the only life goal that I truly have, that I will live by forever, is that I wanna leave this world a better place than I found it. And that is how I live my life. And to me, that's acting—um—that's treating other people, and literally, like, living by the golden rule, and treating other people the way I want to be treated, even if I'm having a time where I'm like, "I don't want treat anyone how I want to be treated, I want to punch somebody in the face! Even if I wouldn't want to be punched in the face!" Like there are times when I feel like that. But I'm not going to, like, actually go and punch someone in the face. I'm going to assess, why am I feeling like this? So like I'm someone who—I just wanna radiate positive energy, and hug everyone, and I love animals, and I love nature—I've never eaten meat, I'm a vegan. Um—and—I hope one day my—the, the love that I feel, for—like—this existence that I have been blessed with can reach—anyone else. Like everyone. Or—everyone, yeah, everyone. Like, veryone. People will be like, in the future be like, "Wow there was this person who like loved everything, her name was Kai. Like—well maybe not everything, but they were just, like—they left this world a better place than they found it, for real. Like, that was what they did!" And I hope that's, like—That's like my goal. Is like, I wanna be—I wanna change something. I wanna make it better.

Maya: No that's awesome, I approve. Is there anything else you would like to add before we wrap up?

Pelton: Um—I've had a lot of times in my life, where, um—I forgot to, like, breathe, and—realize that not everything in this world is perfect. And you can't change every—body, and everyone's mind, but what you can do is change the way that you would react to something that you disagree with, or react to something that you don't necessarily wanna hear, and—learn to live with—good enough, while still striving for perfect.

Maya: That's—

Pelton: And—hugs take twenty seconds for the—oxytocin or whatever to kick in, so you need to hug for at least twenty seconds when you hug people! That's a proper hug! Cool, that's it.

Maya: Awesome, thank you so much.

Pelton: Thank you!

Maya: This is great.