NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ZAVÉ MARTOHARDJONO

Interviewer: Nadia Awad

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Transcribed by Jamie Magyar

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Nadia Awad: [laughter] Okay. It's May 2, 2017. I'm with Zavé Martohardjono at—in Crown Heights and, uh, I am about to record an oral history with them for the New York Trans Oral History Project, which seeks to record, uh, the lives of trans and gender nonconforming folks as—as they tell and remember their experiences. Okay. I'm going to—um, I think I'm going to start with, uh, if you could tell me a little bit about where you were born and what that place was like?

Zavé Martohardjono: [clears throat] Um, I was born in Montreal, in Canada, in 1984. Um, we moved from Canada to the States when I was a toddler, so I don't have much of my early memories of Montreal, but the city has shaped my life in many ways because my, um, father's first kid lived there her whole—lives there now still, and has lived there her whole life, and we've traveled a lot back. And also, my parents met in Montreal, so we have family friends there. So, Montreal has always been another home for me, but, um, I think—I also sort of take pride in the fact that I wasn't born in the US, and my family comes from different parts of the world. My father's American, my mother is Indonesian, but it always sort of feels significant to me that, um, even though I am Americanized and grew up in the US since I was two, um, there is this other perspective, you know, and there is—and it comes both from, I think, the fact that my family emigrated to Canada—my Indonesian family emigrated to Canada, um, in the 70's, and so I definitely have like, a North American perspective, for sure, but I also think about the way that Canadians think about things, not just the way Americans think about things. And I think like, living in and growing up primarily in a US context, there's such a limited, um—not in New York, but like, outside of New York—there's such a limited understanding of the—of the rest of the world, so, yeah. I feel lucky to have been born, uh, in a different context—like, in—outside of the US—and also to now live in New York, which, to me, is a global city, you know? So I feel like I'm protected within [laughter]—within the US. I'm sort of exposed to so much more than just US culture. Um, but, yeah. Montreal is both a place that I do know somewhat intimately through my family that still lives there, and friends who live there, but I didn't spend a lot of time growing up there.

Awad: And, um, can you tell me then, um, a little bit about your parents and what brought them to—or at least what brought your mother to Montreal?

Martohardjono: Yeah. So, my mom was, uh—so my mom's family has a really interesting history of where they live. They're Indonesian, um, but grew up—she grew up mostly in Europe, and her brother and sisters grew up mostly in Europe, so through, um, Germany when they were little, and then Rome, and then Vancouver, and then she came to Montreal. I think she and my aunt came to Montreal, uh, for university, so it was for her undergraduate degree that she went to—I think she went to the University of Montreal, and, um—and, yeah. And she happened to be there, and then my father was—is American and moved to Canada—I can't remember when he moved to Canada, but anyway—he sort of has a somewhat—I don't know. He has sort of like, a politically—like, a contested sort of political relationship to having grown up in a low-income, working-class, white suburban, um, town outside of Boston, so he moved to Canada at some point when he was young, um, I think as an escape from, yeah, what he like, sort of had trouble with in the United States. Um, but—and I think he sees it as like, a political act [laughter]. Um, and then, yeah. My parents met in a bookstore.

Awad: What—do you know much about that store? Can you…?

Martohardjono: That's all I know [laughter]. All I know is that they met in a bookstore. Um, and I actually am not sure what my father was—what—you know, what he was doing for work, um, or whether he was studying, but I know my mom was studying.

Awad: And, um, what—where did you go after you—you were born and you spent your, you know, toddler years in Montreal? Where did you move to?

Martohardjono: Then we moved to Ithaca, New York. Uh, so, my mom is an academic, and we moved to Ithaca, and she got her—she started a PhD program at Cornell [University]. And then from Cornell, uh, we moved to Boston, where she started teaching at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. And then my parents got divorced, um, when I was nine, I believe, and then, um, my mom and I moved to Queens. We moved to New York. And so, I've lived in New York ever since I was nine.

Awad: And, um, do you have any siblings?

Martohardjono: I do. I have a half-sister, um, who I didn't really grow up with, except for a few years, on my—my father's first child.

Awad: So, um, tell me a little bit about, uh, what life in—in Ithaca was like, growing up.

Martohardjono: Um, I think for little kids, it was pretty idyllic. Uh, we lived in the student housing—like, a student housing complex—and, uh, I remember—you know, it was sort of a suburban kind of situation. There were—there was a complex with lots of apartments and apartment buildings, but I remember there was a little brook behind one of our apartments, and, um… Also, I think because—maybe because of the community that we were in, because we were in a sort of student academic community, it was pretty international. Um, there were a lot of immigrant families and academic families from different parts of the world. So, I remember it being very—um, I'm sure it was predominantly white, but I don't remember it being predominantly white, and I remember—yeah, I remember having a very like—um, lots of friends from different parts of the world. I remember my—my very little friend, when I was very little, was Sri Lankan. Her family was Sri Lankan. And, um, yeah. So, I guess, um, kind of the funny intersection of, you know, families who come to the US to study and sort of the international aspects of—of university life. Um, I think I was much smaller, so I think my half-sister had a different experience. She was a little bit older, um, and I think she had—I think she had a different experience kind of—maybe a little bit more aware of small-minded—small-town, small-minded kind of mentalities. Um, but for me, yeah, it was—it was—I remember lots of outdoors activities, going to all the waterfalls and um… There was a—like an old-school health food store—not like Whole Foods, but pre-Whole Foods actual health food store—and I remember like, walking in there and like, the smells of all of the nuts and—you know, very, very granola-style hippie Ithaca deal. Yeah.

Awad: And what was, um, elementary school like for you—for you there?

Martohardjono: So, elementary school was, I guess—when does elementary school start? In like fourth grade or fifth grade?

Awad: Good question. I think it's at like, first grade.

Martohardjono: For some re—yeah. Oh, first grade?

Awad: Yeah.

Martohardjono: Yeah.

Awad: I mean, that's maybe—

Martohardjono: Yeah, I'm pretty sure I was in the first grade when I was in Ithaca. Um, I know that I started school there, because I remember the day that—that I went to school, and I did not want to separate from my mom, and it was—it was pretty dramatic. I like, threw a—I threw a whole fit. Um, so I'm sure I went to kindergarten and first grade there. Um, I don't know. I don't remember—I don't remember a ton about school. I just sort of remember—yeah, the challenge of starting to go to school. Yeah.

Awad: So—um, so here's a question. As you were, uh, growing up, I guess—like, pre-high school, we'll say, because that's generally more memorable for people—um, as you were growing up, can you give me a sense of what—what ideas about, you know, being a boy or being a girl or whatever, you know, you were exposed to, and what kinds of messages, maybe, you grew up with?

Martohardjono: Sure. I never—so, I'll say this with the context of: I'm sort of transgender, genderqueer-identified, you know—um, born female and now sort of present masculine but also genderqueer. It never occurred to me until my early-mid twenties what—what gender meant. I never thought about my gender in a conscious way—well, that's not really true. I understood and experienced sexism, and understood and experienced my body as a woman's body, and never ever had a doubt about that until I was in my early twenties. Um, so—and also, I think my relationship to gender is like, very—I have a very empowered relationship to gender. So, my mom, who is, you know, a like, high femme, power femme, amazing woman—you know, she had—she imbued a really proud sense of—of her gender as a feminist woman, and so I always looked up to that, and I never—I never doubted my own—I never had any questions about my own gender. I knew myself to be her daughter, and my father was also very proud of having three daughters—so, he has um, you know, two biological children and then one children from a previous marriage—um, child from a previous marriage who he took care of. So, he always, you know—like, has so much pride about like, three daughters, you know? And it never occurred to me—I mean, I remember—I remember the moment when that thought happened. It was really

more around college, and even in college, um… And it's so interesting, just identity, because I think my awareness of my racial identity and my ethnic identity was so clear from the start, that being mixed-race, um—there was consciousness at the very, very beginning of my life, because you sort of have two families, and you're—um, you're kind of outside on both—on both sides, you know? Um, and also, the exoticism, I think, particularly plays a part for um, Asian folks—but I'm not even necessarily visibly identified as Asian, so there's—I mean, there's so much around race and ethnicity that has always been very clear to me, so I think genderqueerness came, in a way, as a second wave—like, as an afterthought—and more as I was older. Um, so when I was in college, for example, uh, I had friends who identified as genderqueer, and, I would say, kind of trans-ish. So, not necessarily in the—in the same sort of strong stance that I see now, I think, with—especially with young transgender people, there's really a—there's really, um, no—no hesitance to claim trans identity or genderqueer identity. Um, but I didn't have a sense of that. And I really think there is a shift generationally, too, because I remember—this is not necessarily around gender. This is more around, you know, sexual identity, but I remember in high school, basically all my friends were queer. We were all queer, and we were all sleeping with each other, and we all had these really romantic friendships with one another, but there wasn't necessarily the—the clear identity politics of what it meant to be LGBTQ. But I remember when I was a senior, I had a friend who was, um, a junior, and he was out and, um—you know, identified as out, identified as gay, and was sort of the like, lead organizer at the—at the GSA, you know? And I remember just that I think there's such a clear generational difference just of one year, where sort of the consciousness of organizing and wrapping that with your sort of relationships and your personal identity all become so much clearer, and I look at younger generations now, and I see—um, you know, I see that there's such a different—they're growing up in such a different context, where genderqueerness is, um, part of—you know, part of the vocabulary, talking about trans experience is part of the vocabulary. So, for me, my questions around gender—first the awareness came in, I think, when I was college, and then it took me, I would say, about seven years to actually situate myself as trans-identified—so, kind of later in my twenties. So, when I was in my early twenties, um, I moved home from college and um, just was in queer community in Brooklyn, mostly in Bed-Stuy. Um, I came back here and um, just like—you know, just out of sort of, you know, partying and political organizing, and just all kinds of different sorts of community, um, yeah. Like, there was this really strong—I mean, maybe I'm nostalgic, but there really was this like, strong sense of queer POC—predominantly POC—community in Brooklyn. And I moved back to Brooklyn—I moved to Brooklyn, because I grew up in Queens—I moved to Brooklyn when I was I guess 21-22—so like, 2006-2007—and that—and then like, my friends and all the people that I met, you know, sort of like, through the queer scene and through partying—um, and through like, political organizing—seeing very genderqueer, gender-variant people, that was the first time where I realized that it was something that was open to me. Um, and, you know, I'm thinking about really like, gender nonconforming, you know, kinds of identities—so, not necessarily basing your gender identity or your transness around, um, hormone therapy or surgery, but really just claiming genderqueerness in one's body and, you know, they/them pronouns, and things like that. Um, that was sort of really becoming visible to me in a way that it hadn't been before, and then it really took me a long time to, um, feel comfortable being under that umbrella, too. So, I had a lot of struggle with like, "Where do I…?" And it sort of comes—like, the question for me was always around legitimacy, you know, like… There are people who have

experiences where you know for a fact that, you know, um—you know, the gender of the body that you're in is not aligned with the gender that you feel you are, and you have that strong sensibility. And I never had that feeling. So, you know, I didn't experience, you know, what—sort of understood as like, dysphoria, or anything like that. I was, um—I never questioned—yeah, I never questioned my biological gender, and so it took me, yeah, almost a decade to, um, I think feel a sense of legitimacy that I was also in the trans spectrum.

Awad: So, I just want to go back a little bit, um, to cover—to kind of cover our bases a little bit and get a—get a picture of your timeline. So—so, you're in Ithaca throughout elementary school, middle school, and high school, or did you move?

Martohardjono: Yeah. So, I was in Ithaca for, I think—we did a lot of moving when I was a kid. I was in Ithaca for kindergarten and first grade, and then we moved to Boston for second and third grade, and then we moved to Queens from fourth grade on. So, I grew up—so, I say I grew up in New York. I say I grew up in Queens, mostly, because basically fourth grade through—and then junior high school, I went—I was at a school in Queens, and then high school I went—we were living in Queens. I went to school in the Bronx, and then I moved away for college.

Awad: So what—um, what year did you move to Queens? Um, and also, what neighborhood in Queens were you in? You can take a—if you want to drink some tea, you can, uh, take—

Martohardjono: Just let it steep for a second.

Awad: Okay, no problem.

Martohardjono: Um, I'm trying to think. So, I think it was 1993? I think it was either 1993 or 1994 that my parents got divorced, and we moved from—my mom and I moved to Queens. We moved to Forest Hills, and we lived in Forest Hills for most—we lived in Forest Hills when I was in elementary school, and then we moved to Rego Park, which is just the neighboring neighborhood, when I was in junior high school, and we stayed in Rego Park through high school.

Awad: So, can you tell me a little bit about what Queens was like at that time?

Martohardjono: Well, Queens is the best borough in New York City, so… [laughter] I say that even as like, a hardcore Brooklynite for now eleven years, that Queens is by far much cooler, because it doesn't care that it's not cool, and that's what makes it cool. Um, my neighborhood—the neighborhoods I grew up in in Queens are the most globally diverse places in the city. I mean, you know, apart from like, Elmhurst, which is just nearby, or like, Flushing. I remember in Rego Park, we had—and it's funny, because it's like, all different parts of the neighborhood, right? So you—you know, you cross Queens Boulevard and there's like, seven other—seven communities on that side and this side. But we had—I remember there were Russian Jews, Korean families, Egyptian families, um, Colombian families, and people from all over Latin America. Um, I'm trying to think. Um, yeah. I feel like that has been the lucky part of my life, is that I've always grown up in really global communities, and, you know, you meet people in the public school system in New

York City from all over the world, and also a lot of recently immigrated—um, emigrated families and um, people who are coming from really different contexts. So, um—but there was also—I think because Queens is on Long Island, there's also like, a predominant culture, too, of Jewish families and sort of the Long Island—sort of like, Long Island experience—the like, white Jewish Long Island experience, and that like, definitely, you know, shaped my life. I went to every bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah, and like, our whole lives were organized around that, and, you know, no matter where you're from, you like, would go to every bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah and it was like, the highlight—the social highlight of life, um, which I feel really grateful for. Um, but yeah, I—you know, I also had friends who were—I had a lot of mixed-race friends, too, both when I was growing up, um, in like, middle school and high school. So I remember I had—one of my best friends in middle school was, you know, half Colombian on one side, half German on the other side, and, yeah. I think I had a very sort of diverse upbringing, and sort of a sense of, um—I don't know how to describe it, but it's sort of like, uh, a very—the opposite of homogeneous experience, where there wasn't sort of a… You know, I think I'm lucky that I didn't necessarily feel like an outsider, and that being mixed-race—you know, like, the tensions of that were more about where I fit within my family, but in—in the cities that I grew up in, I felt, um, that there wasn't sort of one way to be, and there wasn't sort of an oppressive, dominant culture.

Awad: Um, can you tell me a little bit about how Queens in like, the 90's, or even New York more broadly in the 90's, is different from the New York today—you know, like, from your personal experience?

Martohardjono: Yeah. I mean, I—you know, the Giuliani sort of clean-up—quote-unquote "clean-up" of New York—happened when I was in high school, so I remember—kind of vaguely, but I do remember—um, just how vibrant public life was in New York. Um, it just wasn't as corporate, you know? Especially in neighborhood neighborhoods, you know, you have family-owned businesses, and we used to just be running around on the streets. I mean, I grew up, um, walking around the neighborhoods with my friends from the time that I was in the fourth or fifth grade, or taking the subway, or, in high school, traveling around in these little like, high school packs. And we would travel all the way from Brooklyn to the Bronx, to the West Side, to the East Side of Manhattan. I mean, like, there was no limit to where we would go, and we would go on these adventures and, you know, always—you know, always with each other, always like, taking care of each other—but, I mean, everything was very… Um, I think it must be so different now, to grow up as a kid. I mean, also—I was talking about this the other day with some friends at work—that I don't think there was so much of this sort of corporate culture built around childhood and children's entertainment and things like that. Like, I grew up going to see, like, NC-17, R-rated movies with my parents—like, arthouse films, you know? I didn't like, grow up necessarily on Disney. There weren't sort of the same—there wasn't the same culture of children-specific activities, you know? I'm sure that we went to, you know—I remember having birthday parties in Central Park, and going to like, Hard Rock Cafe or whatever with all my little friends, but, um, I think there was a little bit less sort of corporate culture around how you raise your kids or what you do with your kids. So, and there was also—and I wasn't totally aware of this until after the fact and later—but, you know, the club scene was in its prime in the like, early to late 90's, and I remember going to—there was—I think there still is this like, roller rink—it's not really a roller

rink. It's just a little area in Central Park where people go with roller skates and um, dance to house music—just like, roll around and dance to house music—and we used to do that, you know, on the weekends, just go and watch the, um, roller-skaters, and I grew up listening to like, Deee-Lite and all of these amazing, um, house music stars. I went, like—I remember like, we used to go to concerts a lot. That was like, the main activity, was going to concerts. So, I remember there was a Tower Records—when I was in middle school, there was a Tower Records on Broadway, and before Green Day was even a thing, we went to a free concert in Tower Records, and they were just debuting, so like, they—no one ever heard of these people, or whatever, and I remember like, I was so excited. I had a friend, um, who I used to go to concerts with—like, you know, as much as possible, and we'd go with our parents or whatever. We went to see all these bands, but I—yeah, I grew up listening to music and, um, yeah. And I just—I'm sure that young people still do that, too, but there's also a—sort of a different music scene now, where, um—maybe, maybe not—but I feel like it wasn't sort of kid-specific, the things that we would do. Um, and I just think of it as like, a public culture, that you could just kind of wander around the city. It wasn't necessarily—

Awad: It also wasn't securitized in the way that like—

Martohardjono: Right, exactly. It wasn't safe, but, you know, it's not safe now, either. It's just—it also just wasn't—yeah, it wasn't sort of, um—I'm trying to think of like, how we would spend our time. Um, public spaces were our like, living room. So, we would go to—in high school, we would always go to Union Square. That's where everybody would meet, and you'd just go there. Um, and I don't even really remember spending as much time around school as much as like, really in the city, because everyone was coming from different parts of the city, too. So, people lived—so, I went to high school in the Bronx, and I went to Bronx Science, which is a school that you have to test into, and so people were coming from all over the city, from way out in Queens and Brooklyn and, um, all over the city. So, you would sort of like, meet in Union Square. That was a sort of like, central location.

Awad: So, then you would commute from Queens to the Bronx?

Martohardjono: Yeah. Yeah. It was three hours a day.

Awad: And can you, um, explain a little bit that system, for people who aren't from New York?

Martohardjono: Sure, yeah. So, I used to wake up at six o'clock in the morning before the sun rose and get on the R train, and take the R train from—I'm trying to think of what the stop was, now—like, maybe 67th Street in Queens, and then go all the way into Midtown Manhattan, and pick up the 4 at 59th Street and Lexington Avenue, and take it all the way to almost the second- or third-to-last stop in the Bronx, at, um—I think it's—I can't remember if it's, um—it's the stop right near Lehman College. So, Lehman College is sort of north of Bronx Science, and there's—and it's a very sort of um, pretty area, with like, lots of trees, and… Um, it's like—I can't remember if it's Fordham or not, but, yeah. It was an hour and a half just one way, and, um—and I did it—I can't believe that I did that every day [laughter] growing up.

Awad: Can you explain a little bit, why—why did you have to commute there? Can you explain the testing system, and that?

Martohardjono: Mhm. Yeah. So, that is the one tough thing about the New York City public school system, and I remember that my mom had moved us to this particular neighborhood in Queens because the schools were really good in that neighborhood. So, in Forest Hills/Rego Park, the public schools were—were known to be good, and so that's why we moved there. Um, but, you know, in New York City, it's very hard to get a good education, especially if you are not wealthy, so there's this crazy system of testing into schools. And I remember that when—it started in the sixth grade, so—or, it started in the fifth grade, that you started testing into magnet schools. I remember Hunter [College] has like, a middle school that you test into from the fifth going into the sixth grade, um, and we just learned—I mean, just really, from a young age it was sort of like, "You're going to be testing into schools, and you just have to get into the best school possible," and it's really—it's cutthroat. I mean, it's a really—it's really tough, and it's very hard to get a spot, and there's not a lot of school—not a lot of magnet schools, and there's also a ton of classism around, um, local schools. So, you know, if you don't get into a good high school, it really—whether it actually shapes your life, I don't know, but the level of classism around education is really intense in New Y—at least for me, growing up in New York. So, I remember I didn't get—you know, I didn't test into a magnet school middle school, but then we studied, you know, until our eyeballs were popping out of our faces, for the high school tests. And there was—there's a three-tier system in New York. So, you know, what are considered the best schools are Brooklyn Tech, Bronx Science, and Stuyvesant High School, in that order [laughter]. So also, you know, I was testing for these schools and like, what you got into—you would get into either the first, second and first, or all three, but of course, everyone would go to like, sort of like the top tier of that selection. And I remember the day that I found out that I had gotten into Bronx Science. I came home to my mom, and I showed her the letter that I had gotten in, and I started sobbing, because I hadn't gotten into the top school in New York City. Like, the cutthroat competition, the sense of—the sense of urgency and competition around, um, getting into a good school is really, really intense, and I don't really know how I did it. It's amazing to think that I was so dedicated to studying, because it's kind of mind-blowing at this point.

Awad: So, tell me a little bit about, um, what Bronx High School—uh, Bronx School of Science, is that what the name is?

Martohardjono: Mhm.

Awad: So then, you have people from all five boroughs, including Staten Island, going there, or…?

Martohardjono: Technically. I don't remember anybody from Staten Island, but I'm sure that there was somebody from Staten Island, although that is really—that's a commute.

Awad: That's like, four hours.

Martohardjono: Yeah, that would be hard.

Awad: Because it's like, two hours to get to the city, yeah.

Martohardjono: Yeah. But yeah, there were people from—yeah, there were people from all over—um, kids from all over. Bronx Science was—and I think continues to be, actually—the school population's predominantly Asian—East Asian. I think it was something like 60 or 70% or something like that. Um, and it was—it's a school that specializes in math and science, so the competition went through my—through my high school years, where you were like, testing into classes, you know, to get into AP-level classes or higher-level classes. And then I remember—my mom is a scientist and a linguist, so I was on track for sort of like, um—studying, um, neuro—not neurology, um, neurolinguist—excuse me, neurolinguistics. And, you know, we sort of—I tracked into, you know, research and science classes, and then I thought maybe I would sort of follow suit with her and do sort of neurolinguistic studies. And I remember I—I mean, oh god, it's amazing to think about it now—but when I was a rising senior—I think, right, like a junior going into senior year?—I won the American Academy of Neurology Award for this project that I had—like, a sort of senior—or, like a—yeah, like a senior thesis kind of project. It's crazy to think about it, because I was doing this ERP study on adolescents—I can't even remember—

Awad: What's ERP?

Martohardjono: ERP is, um—let me see if I can remember this right—but it's basically, um—you measure electromagnetic impulses with a—with a cap on, and you—you know, you can test for various things. It's just sort of um, a methodology, and adolescents of a certain age are sort of under-studied in—generally, in like, um, ERP studies, so I was—and since all my friends were in that age group—I can't remember what I was actually studying for—like, I can't remember what my thesis was, but, um, yeah. I studied this under-studied population and then won this national award for neurology—neuroscience.

Awad: That's pretty cool.

Martohardjono: Yeah. But, I mean, it's like, just like, a testament to how intense, I think, magnet—public magnet schools are in New York City, that you're just specializing so young, um, and sort of already trying to track into a career in some way. Um, and then the very opposite of that experience was going to a liberal arts college, and—

Awad: So where did you go after high school?

Martohardjono: Um, I went to Brown University after high school and studied political science, and I think I was still sort of tracked in—like, trying to figure out the legitimate—um, you know, the legitimate course of study, and it took me a really long time. I feel like now I'm finally understanding how—you know, how interdisciplinary my life is, and that I—you know, I think it… And it's—it's funny, because I feel like there's—there's an analogy between, you know, getting out of the confines of, you know, trying to prove to myself and prove to the world that I'm—you

know, that I was a smart young person with ambition, and there's—there's an analogy in my mind, sort of psychologically and emotionally, between that and sort of loosening the reins around my gender identity, because I think, you know, I sort of grew up with this—or I had some sort of conviction around what was legitimate and illegitimate, and…

Awad: Where do you think that came from, that particular notion of illegitimate versus legitimate?

Martohardjono: I think it's just the inner workings of my mind. Like, I don't think anyone ever imposed anything on me, um, but I think that I—

Awad: Because that's a—it's fascinating to me, versus like, usually people will say, "I wasn't authentic." But "illegitimate"—it's, you know? Maybe because you're a linguist's child, it's like another level, you know?

Martohardjono: Authentic. Yeah.

Awad: Or, "I wasn't real." But to say, "I wasn't legitimate," has…

Martohardjono: That's interesting. I mean, I—yeah, I think—well, I guess there's also something there for me about, you know, your core identity experience and how people perceive you, and I think being mixed-race, that's such a tricky question. And I think about how I always knew ethnically and racially that my mixedness and my, um, you know, quote-unquote "ambiguity"—or really, like, this sort of passing privilege where like, I could pass as many different sort of light-skinned ethnic combinations or whatever, but no one ever really knew what exactly was going on. And I guess I think about it in that way, right, that we have our—we have our core identity, and we have our core experience, but that might not be legible to anybody outside of ourselves. And I guess the legitimacy thing is more, I guess, sort of trying to—this idea of like, trying to prove something, or being—but also, I guess, being seen as—being seen as something, being recognized as part of it. So, yeah, I guess the distin—just the slight distinction between "authentic" and "legitimate" for me is that "authentic" is—"authentic" is whatever your experience is, which is a shifting experience, but "legitimacy" is more about how you're perceived and how you're—how you're boxed into whatever you're boxed into, and how the world treats you from the outside. And I feel like it took me a really long time to sort of loosen the reins around, um, what I had to be, versus what I could be, versus what I am—or, yeah.

Awad: Or need to be.

Martohardjono: Mhm. Yeah. And I think, also—I mean, like, in thinking about my gender journey, you know, a big part of the reason why it took seven years for me to really be comfortable in identifying as trans, um, is because I think at first it was really hard for my mother to swallow the possibility that her daughter was not just a daughter. And we went through a long journey together—not necessarily a conscious journey with lots of conversation, but it took us a really long time to get comfortable, and I think I kind of hid. It was impossible to like—excuse me, to

hide my life from her, because my gender presentation was shifting in my early and mid twenties, and I was dating trans people, and I was dating genderqueer people, and so all of that was there, but we didn't necessarily talk about it. And I basically decided, sort of in the end of my twenties—yeah, like, when I guess I—I can't remember if I was 26 or 27—um, I decided to take testosterone. And that was a really tough—it took a really long time to get there. A really long time.

Awad: Why was that—why was it so hard to—to get there? Can you just say more, a little bit, about that?

Martohardjono: Well, for one, one of the first conversations that I had with my mom about pronouns—and I, at that point, um, used they/them pronouns—um, and we were having a contentious conversation about it. And at the time, I was also dating, um, you know, trans—genderqueer and trans people, and so there was this obvious sort of shift happening. And I just remember my mom saying—and I'm sure she didn't even really mean it, um, as a hard and fast statement—but she basically said, you know, "They/them—it's sort of not linguistically—you know, it doesn't make sense—you know, just by fact of language, it doesn't make sense. The conjugation doesn't make sense, um, to have a plural pronoun with a singular—in a singular conjugation, um, but I can deal with that, but whatever you do, don't take hormones." And I took that as—I really took that as like, a rule. I didn't take it as a statement of fear about change, or a statement of, um, trepidation or any kind of—like, I didn't take it as an emotional reaction. I took it as…

Awad: "This is a condition for her."

Martohardjono: Yes. "There's going to be a problem if you take hormones." So, for seven years, I told myself it wasn't possible for me to do that, and I—I remember even working with, um—there's a yoga teacher and, um, herbalist in the trans community, Jacoby Ballard, who started Third Root—or co-founded Third Root—like, I remember going to Jacoby and, um, working with, uh, like an herbal—what is it called?—a tincture that was sort of—that was sort of addressing, like, the hormonal systems, and I thought, "Well, this is something that I can do that's like not," you know? "Not—not hormones from the doctor, like not, you know, sort of um, like, foreign elements to the body going in, but it's something that like, maybe I could see some, you know, slight changes with my body." Because it—so, there was the desire there. The desire was there, but I felt like I—there wasn't—

Awad: Can you explain what that desire was? Because earlier, you had stated you didn't quite—you didn't experience dysmorph—uh, dysphoria, sorry—

Martohardjono: Right.

Awad: —so I was wondering if you could explain a little bit what your desire was when you were—um, started to consider transitioning?

Martohardjono: Mhm. Yeah, I think I—I think it was first like, an externalized desire. So, I found myself, you know, drawn to and attracted to genderqueer people, and, um—and I'm, you know—sort of the genderqueer—like, the spectrum that I guess I was more on was sort of like, genderqueer folks within like, the dyke communities in Brooklyn. And, uh, I think I externalized a lot of that desire by sort of, you know, dating trans people, and dating queer people, and dating genderqueer people, and seeing, um, sort of, you know, masculine-presenting dykes or masculine-presenting people as like, this, you know, beautiful—this sort of beautiful expression. And then, um, my—one of my like, first big queer relationships, um, was with someone who now identifies as trans, but they were also going through all of these questions—and they were a little bit older than me—going through all of these questions in their own life, and so I think we had, um—there was just like, a lot of shared exploration around questions of identity. But it also—you know, I'm very aware of the fact that I come from like, just a slightly older—you know, technically I'm a millennial, but like, sort of the older spectrum of that—and, um, the people—like, my friends and my lovers at that time were all, um—even if they presented as trans, the question about whether or not they were trans was still, um, there. It wasn't—it wasn't determined yet. And, um, I think one major thing that really shifted my perspective about myself, actually, was, um, getting to know Rusty and Chelsea [Goodwin], who you will interview—Rusty Mae Moore and… It's funny, because I actually knew Rusty. Rusty was—is—the parent of my high school boyfriend, but I didn't know her as well when I was in high school, and we became friends when I was in my twenties, and I started making a film about her and her house. Um, and this house—her home, where she and her partner Chelsea, um, essentially extended—opened the doors of their house to the trans community, mostly trans women—mostly trans women who didn't have a place to go, in the early 90's. And so in discovering this whole history of this house that I had been to when I was in high school, but like, it was—there was also some tension around, um—around that with—with, um, her son, so I didn't have like, full exposure to this trans community when I was in high school, and then I became really familiar with it when I was making a film about them in grad school. And, um, I think one of the biggest impressions that I—that was left on me was Chelsea's gender expression, because she, um, sort of identifies as a butch dyke, and I think seeing trans people who really were not sort of quote-unquote "gender conforming," um, kind of opened it up for me, you know? Because for me, being trans is not about, um, being a man, you know? It's not about, "I was always a little boy, and there was a mistake." Um, so, really seeing the full, um, range of expressions, even to the point of like, you know, knowing—knowing how you identify and not, um—in a way, not letting this question of passing, you know, become like, the—and I say this with full knowledge of, you know… Passing is really, um, a safety mechanism for people. Um, it can be the—the barrier from violence, or the barrier from, um, physical harm, but I think I was really inspired to really become closer friends with these older trans women dykes who, um, just were really in their bodies. And it just like—it just sort of opened—I think it opened it up for me. So, both like, seeing them—they're—you know, they're of an older generation from me, and then, um—and then building community with them, also sort of intergenerational community, um, and so, yeah. After I finished that—making a film about them for grad school, we all worked on this theatre production. It was this big collective—trans, queer collective theatre project, and then I—then I felt really sort of comfortably situated in this very intergenerational, um, trans sort of arts collective, where—I mean, there were just—every kind of expression was present. And—and then I think by the time—you know, I think by the time

like, the seven years passed, or whatever, from the time that I had had that really contentious conversation with my mom, um, in my early-mid twenties, um, I think my life has been so shaped by queer community, has been so shaped by trans community that it really—i don't know. The question—like, there's nothing—like, there's no one left to convince about it. Like, it took me a really long time to even just recognize myself in my own community, um, and like, this—you know, this idea of legitimacy that we were talking about, right, like, eventually, just kind of kicked in, because it's like, you wake up and you're like, completely surrounded by queer community. Everything you're doing is like, queer and trans community, queer and trans politics, and, you know, activist politics and all of this, and it's like—"Yeah, I think you're legitimate. I think you can do whatever you want to do with your body, and I think it's time to do whatever it is that you want to do with your—you know, with your healthcare." But I also remember—like, I had been going to Callen-Lorde for years—the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center—I'd been going there for years, and I remember that like, for years, I wanted to have this conversation with my doctor about hormones, and I could never bring it up. It was just too—um, it was just too scary, because I—I was convinced in my head that, um, they would say, you know, "Prove to me why you want to take hormones." Um, and I sort of like, wasn't ready to, you know—it took me a really long time to, um, work up the courage to potentially lie to my doctor and say, you know, "I knew from the time that I was"—I mean, I can't remember what I—I can't remember what the conversation was, but I didn't know like, what I would say if someone asked—if my doctor asked me, um, you know, why—"Why do you want to take hormones?" and I wasn't sure if I would be able to get a prescription for hormones if I said, "I'm curious," or, "It's just what I want," or, you know what I mean? Like, there's also a lot of—just, the medical, um, industry makes it really hard for people to access what they need and want, um, because you have to go through this process of proving you're "legitimately"—and I say that with quotations—"legitimately transgender."

Awad: And so, was it—I know you don't remember your conversation with your physician, but was it difficult for you to access the resources that you need, or…?

Martohardjono: No. I think by the time I worked up the courage to do it, I basically knew what they might ask, and I—I had heard from—like, basically, you know, people—it's like, everyone talks about this, you know? You talk about your experiences with other trans people and other genderqueer people, and you sort of figure out like, how you work the system to get what you need. Um, and so I remember just saying, you know, "I want to try hormones," and I can't remember what the conversation was, but it was very short. And I think because Callen-Lorde is such a supportive community health center for those kinds of services, it was sort of just a matter of—of talking to my doctor about it, and then, I think, talking to—like, they have a trans health resources, um, team there, too, so, yeah. By the time I was ready to have the conversation, it really—it wasn't hard. And I mean, I had picked going to Callen-Lorde because I knew eventually I wanted to work up to that conversation. So I knew it wouldn't be—it wouldn't be a situation of asking, you know, just a general physician to start hormone treatment.

Awad: And during this process—now, you had thought about this kind of in your early twenties, and it was, uh, like you said, a seven-year process to kind of get to a place where you could be okay with it. I'm wondering—you know, you're post-college at that point—and I'm wondering,

did you have any concerns about, um, the workplace or how to, uh, deal—negotiate that in the workplace?

Martohardjono: Yeah. So, I, at the time, was working at the Astrea Foundation, which is a global LGBTQ funder for activist groups around the world, and I think that was another big, um, incentive, in a way, was that I knew that they had a really good trans healthcare plan. Um, I know that—I remember that they had, um, benefits for people who wanted to have surgery, and I had talked to a trans coworker who had gotten, you know, a lot of his healthcare, and surgery, and health needs like, covered under their plan, and had walked me through like, you know, all the benefits, and how supportive—you know, the various means of support. So, I think if I had been working somewhere else, I'm not sure I would've gone through the process at that point. Like, I think that part of the timing of starting hormone therapy was because I was in a trans-supportive, trans-friendly environment.

Awad: In terms of healthcare and employment?

Martohardjono: Yes, but also just in terms of—I mean, more so in terms of the process of being on hormones, and physical changes, and, um, openness to being able to self-identify and tell your coworkers how you want to be identified. All of that stuff, I think, in a different environment would've barred me from—from taking that all on. And I don't think that I was casual about the process, but I think I also felt fairly comfortable, um, seeing other friends and lovers go through that process. And it's funny that I often think about how, when I was in my early-mid twenties, all the people that I was lovers with were all sort of like, you know, quote-unquote "pre-T" or "pre-hormone," and now—you know, it's sort of like, one by one you would see your friends, and lovers, and community members kind of go through the process of transitioning, and I think, in a way, I feel like maybe I was on the later end of the—of the train, but, um, I think you also learn a lot from other people's experiences when you're exposed to that. And, you know, luckily I've never—like, I'm not in an isolated context, so I also got to see and learn about what that experience would be like before, you know, claiming it for myself. And I'm grateful that—that I was in a queer workplace, because I think outside of that—outside of a queer-friendly and queer workplace, I think it's really challenging. I think a lot of people—well, I don't know in numbers, but I imagine that it's much easier, for example, to transition, get all your paperwork done, and walk into a new job, you know, in the bigger world, than it is to transition while you're somewhere. Uh, I have friends who um, started hormone therapy and like, have been going through really difficult experiences just having their workplace and the institution where they work respond to their changes, rather than vice versa, because it's sort of like, well—you know, you—I don't know—you come in one way, and it's like—you know, there's all this hullabaloo over it, rather than just identifying that someone is going through a process and accommodating them. Um, I think it's super challenging. So, that was a big part, was that I had—that I was working at a queer foundation. Yeah.

Awad: Um, I guess I just want to ask you like, two more questions, and I think this—I think we can like, kind of wrap up a little bit. Um, let me think for a second. Hold on. Little break. Okay, I figured out what I want to ask you. So, you've talked a lot about how important being a part of,

uh, queer communities of color in New York has been to you at—really at every stage of your life—and I'm just wondering, can you tell me a story of like, one of your favorite memories as a, you know, young—and now, you know, queer elder—I'm just kidding—um, member of this community? I had a friend, actually, call one of my other friends who's thirty a queer elder, so now it's a constant thing where we're constantly doing that, so I just wanted to…

Martohardjono: Oh, no, no. Definitely until… We don't get to claim that just yet.

Awad: But if you could tell me one of your—

Martohardjono: From my—from my young life, or from my like, twenties?

Awad: Any—anything that comes to mind. Just one of your favorite memories of life in the queer community in New York.

Martohardjono: Okay, I'll tell two little stories. And one—the first story is, uh, this sort of memory of being young and queer, but not naming it as such. So, I'm thinking about all of my friends in high school, and, you know, how we used to sort of be in these little friend group packs and travel around the city, and go from Queens to Brooklyn and all over the city. And, um, you know, people were really artistic. I remember we had a poetry club, and one of my best friends and I had started this poetry club, and that was like, so much a part of like, our friend group. And we were making these little magazines, and they were like, really cool magazines, too. And, um—and I remember that young life being—being very queer, but we didn't name it that way, you know? So, I remember sort of—basically being in love with my boyfriend's best friend, who also was queer, mixed-race Filipina, had no idea she was gay, was like, super butch and had like, this amazing humor. She was just like, super sexy and so funny, and was not out at all. And, um, I remember basically—she and my boyfriend at the time, who's now out and queer, um, and I all slept together, and it was this really queer experience, and I feel like we didn't have the—the words or the vocabulary for it, but we all knew that our desires were not sort of boxed in in any way. And I—and I think about—I sort of think about, like, my early sexual life with a lot, um, kind of admiration, because I feel like the—um, the pressure to, you know, identify in a certain way, and how you identify sexually, and all of that is like, so much on young people. And thinking about the sense of safety that I felt within my friend group, you know, which was really mixed in all these different ways—um, but that there wasn't this sort of match-to-match situation. It was like we were—we were friends, and we were family, and we were comfortable with each other, and then it sort of naturally extended to, you know, sexual loving, sexual relationships. And I—I feel like that's so rare, and that's not even necessarily like, what—that's not even—like, that loving openness and friendship is not even necessarily a part of gay cruising culture. So I have this fondness for the—like, the physical and emotional love of all of my—that I shared with so many of my friends in high school. And then I think once we went to college, we all came out [laughter]. Like, it was that turning point of going—

Awad: Wait. Orientation week?

Martohardjono: [laughter] Yeah. I went to—well, first I went to like, the students of color pre-orientation. So I was still sort of like, more situated in my like, racial identity than I was in my like, queer identity, but I think by the time we all got to college, like, then it was clear. I—my friends make fun of me to this day that I stood up at like, pre-orientation and said that I was bisexual and mixed-race, and I was like, diva central and wearing this little crop top with—that had like—and this is like, very 90's. This is like, from Eighth Street, where you would get all of your raver gear, which I was super into. Like, we would—like, I was a pre-teen or a teen when like, raver culture was a big thing, but we had all of the outfits. And I was wearing this little crop top that was like, in the—in the aesthetic style of a Visa MasterCard, but it said "Diva" on it. So, clearly a queer kid, like, walking in, and I was like, "I'm bisexual." Um, so, yeah. It's like, the—the terminology is so funny, right? Like, you—bisexual is like, the first way of saying, "I'm queer," and then it like, takes a while to be like, "My queerness is also my transness," and like, all of those formulations sort of take a while. Um, I think another good memory of, um, being in community, was—yeah, was sort of like, um, in my mid to late twenties, just going out in Bed-Stuy, going to house parties in Bed-Stuy. Um, and back then, everyone actually could afford to live in Bed-Stuy, so like, people—you really would just walk all through the neighborhood, and you would go to people's houses and you'd hang out, and you'd go to these really great dance parties. And there was a really awesome party called Sweat that—um, this person Kane, who's still around and is sort of known for, um, their—like, they basically do—like, they like, run a barbershop—and, you know, they're still around, but they used to throw these amazing, um, parties—dance parties at Outpost on Fulton. And that's where I just met—that's how I met so many people. And I'm not saying that that culture doesn't still exist. I'm sure it does, but this was pre-app—like, really pre-app—and, um, there just wasn't the same kind of literal filtering that you do to meet strangers. Like, I think you would meet because you would go out dancing. So, there were a couple of places. There was like, that party, Sweat, at Outpost—and then it moved around Brooklyn. There was this fantastic bar called Grand, um, on Lafayette and Grand.

Awad: Oh, yeah. We used to call it Grand 275. I used to work at the Senegalese restaurant next door to that place.

Martohardjono: Oh, yeah, which is now—

Awad: [inaudible]

Martohardjono: That's right. That place was so good, too. Right. So, Grand—and actually, that was like, kind of—I'm thinking about it now—like, Grand was—yeah, was like the epicenter—

Awad: Was a black queer bar, too.

Martohardjono: Yes. Black-owned, um, queer bar and restaurant. And, um—and also, again, like, very intergenerational, which I wonder if that's still a thing now, but like basically, my boss at the time was best friends with the owners of the bar, and we would go there all the time. And she—her partner is a musician, and so we would just hang out and go to this bar, and it was right around the corner—like, very close to my house, and so we would party there, and we would just

go there, you know, as like, a spot in the neighborhood. But, um, I was in my twenties, and I was partying with like, forty-year-olds and fifty-year-olds, and musicians and artists and this like, amazing kind of community of um, predominantly black queer artists, but also, you know—you know, POC folks of different race and—races and ethnicities. And, um, I—yeah, I feel like that—those spaces were super formative for me. Super formative. And that was a place of understanding myself and my desire, but also a place of learning my politics, learning about, um, queer history, learning about, um, black and POC history in the US, learning about, um, arts and culture, and like—yeah. And very offline. All of it was super, super offline. I mean like, you'd go into the bar and you would just talk to anybody who was there. Um, and you would dance for hours. And like, I think that's also part of it, is like, it's—it's still like, the relics of like, the house music scene, and—in New York City, which still goes on strong. And like, yeah. Just the—like, the affinity that comes out of like, dance celebration and like, queer—celebratory queer community.

Awad: Okay, I—I, um, I think I want to end on that note. I think that's a good note to end. Um, is there anything else that you wanted to share or comment on, that you can think of?

Martohardjono: Um, I can't think of anything specific. Yeah.

Awad: That's okay. Alright, thank you.

Martohardjono: Thank you.