

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

HANNAH BAER

Interviewer: Aviva Silverman

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Aviva Silverman: Hello my name is Aviva and I will be having a conversation with Hannah Baer for the New York Trans Oral History project in collaboration with the New York City public libraries community oral history project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is February 19, 2019 and this is being recorded on Broome Street in Chinatown in my apartment Library. Hi Hannah!

Hannah Baer: Hi! How are you?

Silverman: I'm good, how are you?

Baer: I'm pretty good.

Silverman: I was thinking because you're in school right now, training in therapy if we do the regular format where I just ask you questions, and I just wanted to ask what's on your mind?

Baer: That's really sweet. Um, well today I'm getting a little bit sick so I'm thinking about my body and winter and cold, like temperature stuff, and cold, calling it a cold. Does it really come from being cold or does it come from—because the weather's been nice but I have sniffles so am I still sick or... I'm thinking about school because I had a long weekend this weekend and I'm gonna go back to school tomorrow and I'm learning about this thing right now, I'm about start doing research with this professor who conflict in psychotherapy and specifically how conflict is escalated or addressed or not and the way that she studies it is by coding video so when I was on the train over here I was reading her manual for how to code the video sequences I'm thinking about why it was the way that it was.

Silverman: What does coding mean?

Baer: So they'll be like "these different reactions get coded in a certain way" so basically it means, like, if someone was listening to this recording they'd be like "this thing happened at this moment" and they would code it in a worksheet basically but the code for these therapy videos is for moments of rupture or moments of repair. So one categories for rupture is confrontation and another big category is withdrawal so if the therapist was like "what was going on for you" and the patient changes the subject that would get coded as a withdrawal. Of if the therapist was like "what was going on for you" and the patient said "that was a stupid question" that would get coded as a specific kind of confrontation, but in confrontation withdrawal there's many kinds of those subcategories, little things that might count as... I don't know whatever things, but it's arbitrary any taxonomy like that is arbitrary so I was like "how do they decide which ones to do?" and also what does this mean that this was designed by therapists and not by people who are in therapy? That's what I was thinking about right before I walked into your house.

Silverman: Do you think they're not in therapy too?

Baer: I think they are but I think that—maybe in the same way that doctors go to the doctor but primarily identify with the role that's more powerful and have that power all the time even when

they themselves are the doctor. Like, my mom's a doctor and she'll still boss around the doctor, you know? The therapists who wrote this probably are in therapy but are in a specific social position that makes them specific people to doing the research.

Silverman: That's a lot. [laughter]

Baer: Yeah [laughter]

Silverman: I guess because you're learning tools for emotional intelligence like how to read and legibly see how/why people's reactions are the way they are, I was wondering how you relate that to your everyday life in your friendships and your relationships?

Baer: They keep telling us at school "you're not allowed to do therapy—like you can't use these skills outside of the therapy office, it's wrong" but I think that that framework also implies— I've only been in school for six months, like I've only been in therapy school for two semesters but I think a lot of the stuff that we're learning about is stuff I've been learning about and thinking about and working on for years and years and years and I don't know... someone else recently has been like "has it changed you? Has school changes you yet?" and I was like "I don't think exactly." [laughter] I think that I'm still... I think there are certain parts of the ethical parts of therapy that are important and that make it different from hanging out with your friends. If you're a therapist to someone you're really not gonna talk about it with anyone, you're never really gonna fuck each other, of go on a road trip together or do any of those other kinds of things that friends do with each other and I think that is what makes it protective in a way that hanging out with friends is more volatile and complex and rich in its own sense in another way, you know? But I still...first of all I'm basically like "I'm not really a therapist yet" I don't even practice yet as part of my schooling yet and it'll be different when it changes but also I don't wonder if there is a part of my life where nine to five some number of days a week where I'm just seeing patients and what it would be like to socialize after that and how I would get around that and I think that will be... it's something I wonder about but I'm not totally there yet because I'm still a beginner.

Silverman: Do you think you operate or could operate—compartmentalizing those kinds of emotionally intense experiences? I mean I just wonder that in therapy how someone could contain all of that and move on.

Baer: Totally—I think it depends a lot on what your client are like and I think they talk about that a lot in school but if you see a lot of people who are... who might have frustration or aggression towards you it's a lot different than if you see a lot of people who are sad or just kind of shut down or if you're seeing people who are being hospitalized, if you're working in an in-patient setting where people are heavily medicated or restrained that kind of therapy is way more intense than if you're working with Upper East Side moms who are just like "I'm having a hard day."

Silverman: Do you have a specific type of demographic of people that you are looking to work with?

Baer: When I started applying to therapy schools I was like “I’m gonna work with trans people! That’s my thing.” But now that I’ve been in school for a minute and been seeing how intensely... I don’t know the way that the whole institution of what therapy is set up around and how oppressive it is I think I feel more broadly... like I wanna work with anyone who might get fucked over by that system and that’s a huge range of people, including teenagers and young people and people who are broke and people who have severe diagnoses that are often pathologized in an adversarial way or... and obviously queer people. I feel lately learning about it, I’m really getting into couples’ therapy because it seems so hard, it seems so complex, and I came to doing clinical psych, from social-organizational psychology so I think I’m interested in dyads and groups and relational stuff for a really long time but I don’t really know yet. I mean that’s what I keep telling myself, I keep looking for externships right now and being like “what’s up with this thing?” and I’m like “oh I don’t know, I’m not sure” [laughter] I what I wanna do, I wanna learn different stuff and experience different stuff and try it out, I don’t know.

Silverman: I mean it’s important for this interview if you talk a little more about your social or political work, that led to exploring this other format of relating to people? Just more generally, if you wanted to talk a little about how you got to therapy.

Baer: Totally. I guess professionally there was a part of my life where I was just doing community organizing stuff and doing some of it with activist organizations then doing some of it within the context of youth development, or working with young people doing social justice education.

Silverman: You can name some of the organizations if you want to. Just for the record...

Baer: Yeah. Well, one of my early influential community organizing experiences was with Jews for Racial & Economic Justice (JFREJ) which is an organization based here in New York, and they have an organizing fellowship and you can just apply to get training for community organizing, and I had been working with them for about a year, just as a volunteer. At the time they were doing two campaigns that one of which was entirely volunteer-member lead so anyone who was like “I’m a constituent, I’m a Jewish person in New York” could come to meetings and be a pain in the ass [laughs] including me and we were working on a campaign about police accountability. That was part of a wider coalition called Communities United for Police Reform which was, I think, in 2013 and there was a big win around that case with Stop and Frisk stuff, that I think aligned or was slightly before de Blasio was elected, but I remember doing that stuff and as I was working on that, in that space I got a bunch of opportunities to—I think at some point some college kids came into town and were like “hey, we wanna learn about community organizing” so JFREJ was like “does anyone want to talk to these college students about how this works?” and that was one of my early ones like “oh yeah” and also at that time my day job was with an organization that I think is now called the Center for Social Responsibility [Joseph Stern Center for Social Responsibility]—the JCC in Manhattan. So I was also working in a kind of more mainstream Jewish institution doing more mainstream social justice education, I mean like JFREJ is pretty far left—they’re pretty explicitly anti-capitalist basically as far as you can be and then my day job was with much more center, liberal, progressive kind of institutional non-profit-y think tank and that was

also interesting because I and to learn how to code switch I guess? That was how I got started and then a bunch of different stuff happened, but ultimately I ended up moving to Philadelphia and getting a master's degree in organizational psych and getting to do management consulting stuff that started out because I was doing diversity and inclusion stuff [already] in organizations so I worked at a consulting firm in Philadelphia for a year and then I left that full-time and started doing different projects. And got to do a lot of workshops and trainings on all kinds of stuff—from how to make an all-white organization less unwelcoming to people who aren't white or how to do marketing strategy or hiring strategy, these kinds of more dry business-related questions. And I think that whole time I was like "I really wanna get into the emotional parts of it" like why it's hard for these people to solve these organization problems, I wanna know why, I wanna know what's challenging for them about what they're doing and then it was kind of like that impulse that got me into clinical psych but where's the field where you just get to do the emotional stuff.

Silverman: And what was it like in relation to your gender working in these larger spaces?

Baer: I think it's funny that you ask that because I think that part of the story I don't tell as often because when I'm in psych school they're like "what was your career before this?" "oh I just did this other thing" but I think part of the thing I bury or don't always share is, part of why I felt like I couldn't do organizational development stuff anymore and couldn't do consulting stuff anymore was because so much of what was powerful for me, or why I was powerful doing that work was because I could go board rooms or go to groups of organizational leaders who were often groups of men and just be like "here's what's happening, here's my ideas, here's what you need to do" and be really confident and be really authoritative in front of groups of men and when I started transitioning I was like "you can't actually do that anymore" and I remember I took a big break from doing work like that for almost a year and a half and I think I worked as a barista and I just really practiced being a woman in public and groups and at the end of that year and a half I did a big consulting project for Eileen Fisher and I remember when I was presenting to their executive team last summer and I was wearing a dress and had a whole face of make up on and was modulating my voice and there was one man in the room and the entire time he was just so unsettled and all of these older cis women in drape-y clothes were just like "whatever, here's this person, this gender variant person who just doing her thing, we're just going to be regular" and just act very polite basically and this one guy who was like the finance guy just couldn't get it together, just staring at me as though I was insulting his family or something, he was just really unnerved and I remember being like "I was wrong, like it wasn't gonna be safe for me" because I think at that point I was a lot farther along in my process and just in terms of feeling safe and comfortable in public and feeling ok in my body but in the earlier phases like when I dropped out of that work it was like—I think I would have needed days or weeks to recover from an experience like that. So that's part of the story too, like if you do individual psychotherapy. There's a version of it where you just see queer people, and you just work with queer people, and you're supervised by queer people, now that I'm in school I'm like "well, you can get to that eventually but you actually have to be around a lot of cis people first" but even just getting to imagine that made it seem like more of a viable possibility, than like...that the reality of being... I don't know with consulting stuff there's so many men and so many men who are strongly identified with their institutional power and I mean, it would feel really bad for

my gender to have to go be convincing to them or go be authoritative with them.

Silverman: What has it been like to be trans in school right now? Is there like...what's your experience with that?

Baer: It's funny, it connects to this other thing, like you asked me what I wanted to talk about and I think one thing I'm interested in talking about or thinking about is being in a cultural moment where trans people's visibility is amping up so then also the social or cultural category for what a trans person is also getting more like concretely defined or something? And I think about that in school a lot because I think a lot of my classmates are like ages 22 through 26, maybe studied psych in undergrad and worked in a psych lab for a year for a year or two then applied to psych doctoral programs and they've maybe never chilled with a trans person before and maybe definitely have never seen a trans person every day in school. So at the beginning of the semester they were definitely just kind of on me, like "what's your deal?" and also a little afraid of me and I think also having made friends now more there's a couple of other queer people in my program who are not trans but just really gay and being friends with them and talking a little more about what it's like they've also been like "Hannah, it's not just because you're trans you're a particular person. Like you're intense and you're really verbal and you use big words and blah blah blah." So, also, I think it's been helpful for me to think about what are the ways people experience me because of my gender but also what are the ways people experience me in addition to that or like intersecting with that's also just part of what I'm like or what it's like to be around me.

Silverman: One of my questions, it's funny, is what aspects of your identity are most important to you? Which I'm thinking about how much you hold, and how they much they intersect and amplify each other and what you feel like is important being visualized or known when you interact with people?

Baer: Totally. I mean one of these things that I think it's kind of one of those things you have to think about if you do therapy is the idea in therapy is transference or what are the feelings the patient feels towards the therapist and in traditional psychoanalysis being like "a psychoanalyst is an old bearded white man and like your transference is supposed to be like your feelings toward your father or your feelings towards authority figures" and now in post-modernism we're like "your transference can be anything" and I think the idea I've been chewing on recently is being specific, like, everyone has certain kinds of transference that they pull out of other people or elicit so one of your and my mutual friends really makes people...like elicits feelings of care, other people want them to care for them. Or some of our mutual friends are like "I want you to think I'm cool" like that's a feeling they brought. So one of the things I've been trying to figure out in this phase of my life that's also connected to something we were talking about before is how therapy is interconnected with everyday life and being like "what transference do I elicit from people? What are things people might tend to feel towards me? And how can I keep people safe? Who want to be near me or be close to me or whom I'm in practice with?" And that's a piece of my identity that I've been thinking about lately.

Silverman: Do you have any conclusions that you're drawing out?

Baer: I think that one of the ones that's challenging is that—and this is something that I've been talking about with my other classmates—is that sometimes I think that people do feel like I hold a lot of power even in situations where I feel kind of clueless or in the dark or not really sure what's going on, people imbue power onto me or experience me holding a lot of power and I think that's one that, when I was closeted, I was like "I'm just a feminist man" I felt like that's just like you have to be always... you always are holding that much power because of patriarchy and you are always on the line for it and any time someone experiences disempowerment because of you it's absolutely, one-hundred percent, exactly what's happening and I think that since I've transitioned and have experienced more... like I think I've had more experiences where I'm in a situation and there's been all kinds but I'm specifically thinking of this one situation one with a partner, or not really a partner but like a date a year and a half ago where I was like "oh you were experiencing an intense amount of disempowerment in this situation but I'm not sure that you know..." but also like you're cis and you're dating me as a trans girl so it's kind of fetishize-y and kind of fucking with me, like there were all these ways that this situation is hurting me and is freaky for me but is about structural power and this person doesn't understand it and instead is like "Hannah, you hold all the power" and I was like oh that was like an intense...it's not like that person was wrong or crazy but that's also part of their experience of what it's like to be close to me that I then had to negotiate with and that has also of these different consequences, that people then feel like I'm masterminding the situation or pulling all the puppet strings when I'm like I don't know what's going on? I was just being careless, I was just making a guess about what would be funny or you know, whatever the thing is, but I think trying...maybe part of what that means for me is that it's like a lifelong quest to be more conscientious and also more compassionate with myself or something? To remind myself that I am vulnerable even if other people don't see me that way. Or that's a very mushy and nuanced answer to part of my identity that's important to me but I think it's very honest. That's what I've been chewing on a lot in the last eight weeks. Just really working on that. And again a more conventional answer to that question is to be like "I'm Jewish" or I come from a lot of class privilege so a lot of the organizing work I've done has also been with a lot of other people who have class privilege who are thinking about redistributing resources in different ways and I'm a white person so that's also part of what it means to be an activist in this time is to be like "what does it mean to benefit from white supremacy?" and to have all of the cultural stuff that your ancestors have stripped away because of how whiteness strips away cultural identity in exchange for access to institutional stuff or maybe a more concrete [thing] for someone who's listening to this who's like "what are you talking about?" would be like in the 40's Jewish people couldn't go to ivy league schools really and then by the 60's both of my parents had gone to ivy league schools but both my parents came from Jewish families where they didn't do any kind of Jewish stuff and they didn't speak Yiddish and they didn't wear traditional clothes and that was a power exchange that happened for Ashkenazi Jews in the 20th century I think that I benefitted from in that I got all this institutional access but that I lost out from because I got cut off from all this Jewish history and all this Jewish culture that the Jews who still hold that culture, like Orthodox Jews in New York, are effectively are welcome in a lot of institutionalized spaces and still face much more anti-Semitism and assimilated Ashkenazi Jews are "just white people" or something like that.

Silverman: Is there any way that you're connected to cultural traditions that help reestablish, I

don't know, help you feel more grounded in the past to your ancestry?

Baer: Yeah, when I lived in Philadelphia there was a really incredible synagogue there Kol Tzedek and the rabbi was like a twenty-eight year old trans guy, he may have been a little older than that, but he was trans and the demographic of the people who went to the synagogue was mostly young people who were all... it's weird to say this but usually three-quarter plus visually recognizable gender variant people and that was so, so particular even though it wasn't exactly my people, like, every was really nerdy and really into Yiddish, really into some of these questions about how to reclaim this stuff which I was always like "it's a little too much for me" it wasn't a perfect cultural match so I didn't hang out there all the time but I did start going to Shabbat there every week and trying to give myself room to begin a traditional space and just learn more and I learned a little bit of Hebrew. There was a different trans rabbi and he taught Hebrew so I learned Hebrew and I think just having a connection to the spiritual practice one of my teachers said to me this one time this thing that Judaism is like if Christianity is about individuality and an individual relationship with God and about belief and faith and that Judaism is on the contrary about being around other Jews and about having a relationship with the laws and the rituals and the history and so you don't have to believe in anything to be Jewish you just have to be around Jews and do Jewish shit and that part of enacting it whereas in Christianity you can like go colonize another country and murder a bunch of people but be like "I had a personal faith relationship to God the whole time" whereas in Judaism if you left the community or if you were disobeying the laws then you would have to reckon with what your Judaism was like if it was authentic or if it was intact. And I think that's part of the way that white people got fucked over by white supremacy was, like white Jews, being like "oh what if we didn't live in community and we just Bat Mitzvah our kids or have Jewish country clubs but we're not really living the laws or not really living in community like would we still be Jewish? And then all the children being like "whatever, we don't care." And in mainstream white American Jewishness there's now people being like "why don't young people care about Judaism?" and I'm always like because you guys sold out, because the thing you were leftover with was kind of boring. So then I think it's more of this generational question for people in our generation who want Jewish community, what does it look like? What does a compelling version look like? And I'm still trying to figure it out.

Silverman: Is there any other kind of spirituality that you include in your everyday life?

Baer: I think I got really...when I got into community organizing and I got into...well maybe ever since I was a kid actually, I have a pretty deep and old relationship with Buddhist stuff that I think started when I was eight and I had this teacher who was my summer camp counselor and he was always on me about different stuff but he got me really into certain kinds of meditation stuff and certain kinds of doing sensory and body rituals as a grounding thing that I later learned "oh he was an intense Buddhist" and was trying to teach me certain things he thought would help me but he never framed it like that so I didn't understand until I was a teenager, a little older and then I spent a lot of time in different Zen Buddhist monasteries in my twenties but I think that a lot of that history and tradition and writing of some of those teachers changed my life a lot, around also especially thinking about conflict, thinking about emotions and how to understand what emotions are and how to understand suffering, because some of the Jewish stuff about

suffering is so punishing. Jews are just like “you have to walk through the fire and then maybe you die and no one cares” and in Buddhism

Silverman: [laughing] Where did you learn that one?

Baer: [laughing] I don't know, just in some of the folktales are really like about how there's no redemption or something because it's not Christian it's just some...it's like Job, you just get punished, that's it and in Buddhism there's a little bit more like everyone's getting punished all the time because that whatever part of existing is defined by suffering so what it means to live a full life is learning how to live with suffering and that's been more helpful for me because I think Judaism is a little more like Halloween, just like spooky like “what if being alive just does suck?” And it's like no one's coming for you, you know? And with Buddhism it's like “yeah, no one's coming for you but also like there's no such things as a self and everything's interconnected and you're suffering and everyone else is suffering and you're braided together like part of a tapestry in human and non-human whatever” I'm just now saying really abstract stuff but I think I don't usually [identify] as Buddhist in public because I'm a white girl but I think it influenced me a lot and is a big part of my everyday how I integrate difficult experiences and how when I'm in a difficult situation and I feel stuck and I'm like “how do I feel or what should I do?” I often think more about Buddhist texts than Jewish ones even though in my day to day I would be more likely found at a synagogue than a *Zendō*.

Silverman: Is compassion at therapy school? Is there a way for you to discuss that through conflict strategies?

Baer: I don't know, it's so interesting different therapists—one thing about my school that's particular is that it's interdisciplinary so the different therapies, kind of like different disciplines believe different stuff about that and some of them are like transference, counter transference, so if the patient is mad at you and then you get mad at them that's part of the work of therapy is being “where did these feelings come from? What do they mean?” our relationship is the text and then there's other schools of therapy that are just like “just don't get mad at your patient, stay chill, help them work through their problems” so it kind of depends on who you ask, I think of what the role is of your own emotions in the process. I do think that all the schools to some extent believe that your personal development or your own human development in relationship to your emotions is part of being skillful even if just for familiarity with yourself. Knowing what's hard for you, knowing what some of your tendencies are, but they're not super ambitious or creative about teaching that stuff, I think they could if they were like “how can we get everyone to figure out what their triggers are?” like they could do a lot of group scenarios stuff or role play, there's ways to induce those sorts of things.

Silverman: Is there role play in what you do?

Baer: There is but it's super, super like bounded. I did a role play last week that was about doing intake and you're like “what brings you in today?” and one of your classmates has to come up with a problem and then they're like “I'm sad because I've lost my job” and you're like “I'm sorry

to hear that. When did you lose your job? How long did you work there?” and so you do that with them for ten minutes and that’s where we’re in a class getting prepped to do intake. I do think at higher levels it might be more sophisticated or complex stuff going on, the closest I’ve come to more like... there are these people in social psych who do group relations which is like groups of people getting together for four days at a time and sitting in a room with no agenda but they’re only goal is to talk about what’s going on in the here and now as a group and everyone just loses their shit, everyone gets really upset and is—

Silverman: Is that called something?

Baer: It’s called group relations, that’s what the field is called. It’s really fringe-y but it’s...whatever, I got really into it for a couple years. I haven’t done anything with it in a while but partly because their thing about identity stuff is like “if you’re a trans person in the space or if you’re a black person in the space” they’re like “that’s just whatever transference you evoke from people, that’s just interesting” and they don’t really have a critique of oppression exactly, so when I started I went to a group relations conference in 2016 and I was out and I was pretty alarmed by how unsupportive it was. Everyone was just kind of like trying to out me all the time, trying to talk about it, being really confrontational about it and being like “well, is there anyone in here has a gender experience that’s not normal want to step up and share?” it just felt really kind of hostile and I think the analysis of that space would be like “yeah, that hostility is the transference, that’s the work, like work with the hostility” but yeah I was like no one’s going to...and it’s a way that’s real. Yeah, that was transphobia and yeah, no one’s going to fucking protect you from it but I was like “oh I don’t...” in that part of my process that wasn’t what I needed, to be in spaces like that. But I think some activities like that in formats like that are really helpful for people getting kind of pushed for their stuff and we don’t really do that in my therapy school right now as it stand but we might, I don’t know, I don’t really know what’s happening, like, year three is still a black box.

Silverman: I’m thinking about other ways that you are in your gender now and also in the ways in which you’ve perhaps transitioned with other friends who are transitioning and what that experience was for you?

Baer: Totally. That one’s so interesting, that one is so deep and weird. I think... when I first started, I think before I came out I had a couple things going on for me. One was I had a lifelong thing where I was like a little, little kid I was like “I’m a girl, here’s my girl name, I have all these girls’ clothes” and then as I got older I had a more bounded relationship to it where like every time there’s a school play I play an extremely femme character and when I’m a teenager every school dance I show up in drag but I never—I was always like “but I’m a boy” and then when I got a little older, when I was in my twenties, I had different social justice, I had some trophy social justice mentorship that was like—someone to me was like “it’s wrong to want to be a woman in the patriarchy because it’s wrong for someone with a privileged identity to want to have a more marginalized identity” and so I think I really internalized that and was like whatever part of my gender was unresolved, that’s just something that will work itself out over the course of my life but I didn’t think I could do anything about it, I was just like “I guess I’m just a faggot-y man” or

something. And I had these friends when I was in Philly, I made friends with these punks who were, I don't know, I didn't understand why they wanted to be friends with me because I was like a cis guy who was working at a consulting firm but they thought I was cool and we would do whatever, like graffiti and be losers and eventually there was one night where one of them who strongly ID'd as non-binary and we were staying up all night talking and drinking and they were like "hey, when you talk about your gender it doesn't sound like you feel cis" and I was like "yeah, I don't but like whatever, men shouldn't take up space in this way and I don't want to take up space" and I had all these blocks even around like looking into as part of my own identity and they were like "would you be comfortable if I used they/them pronouns for you?" and I remember having this feeling like my heart rate went up and it was actually four years before that another one of my friends and I we had been working on this social justice retreat together and at the end of the first retreat my friend was like "hey" because that person has now transitioned also, but he at the time was like "you're not a man, like you don't have to be a man" and I was like "I do have to, it's part of the movement" so I had this interaction with a really close friend year before this time in Philly and then I was like "we need feminist men, I need to be in this role, there's no way out" and then years later when I was in Philly and had a different life and this other friend was like "hey, do you want to use they/them pronouns?" I was like "I guess you could use them" but I remember having this physiological feeling of being like "what's going on?" and at the same time I somehow knew, like when I was a young teenager and was into punk stuff I was really into the first Against Me! EPs, all the folk punk stuff and then when the lead singer of Against Me! transitioned I knew about it but I was like "new music isn't cool anyways so I don't even listen to it" but for some reason that spring in Philly I was listening... I found one of their albums and I listened to it and I got the music Laura Jane Grace made after she transitioned and I remember coming home on the train from the consulting firm and I was wearing a suit and had my fancy earbuds in and my Chinese shoes and like perfect five day stubble and perfect glasses, my "professional man" costume, and I was listening to this punk music about being trans and I was riding the subway and I was crying so hard I had to get off the subway and I wandered into a neighborhood in Philly I didn't know and I walked for hours and I was like lost and went into a grief hole and when I came out of it I had no idea where I was or what was going on. Then I was like wait, and I suddenly had this moment like "what does this mean?" like "wait, what's going on? I don't know." And at the time I was dating a cis woman who ID'd as straight and I was kinda like "what's happening?" and I remember kind of telling her about it and her being like "wow, that sounds really intense" and me being like "yeah" but I didn't know what to do. Like there's no instructions and it didn't occur to me—I wasn't like "you're listening to music by a trans woman that is making you really emotional, it might have something to do with your own gender." I was like "nope, that's not what's going on" and then a few months later my friend asked if they could use they/them pronouns for me and I was like "oh I guess so"—so that was the beginning of it but there's been so many phases of being like "I'm non-binary" and when I was ID'ing as non-binary I know privately that there's some part of me that feels like a woman and that like that's what this is all driven by and I'm so afraid to claim that and I'm so afraid to look into it—like I just had to move into it really slowly, which I think is different from other stuff I do in my life, like I tend to be pretty decisive and pretty clear but it was this really slow, emergent process and I was close to a lot of different people in different phases of it and like different relationships that were historical or new had this quality in them that was unlocked because of

both being trans but I think some relationships struggled or certain trans people that I was close to when we were making different decisions about how to be in our gender or how to live as trans people, like it would sometimes feel hard to be close if one of us was like “I wanna try to be more assimilated” or one of us would be like “I’m gonna try to be more ‘freaky’ all the time” it would create tension. I was thinking about this this morning, I think that the favored version [43:49] is that any trans person can support any other trans person in their process or their growth but the reality is that sometimes some person’s process is triggering for other people who are at a different point in their process. Like, if someone’s like “I transitioned one year ago” and like I meet someone who’s just transitioning they might be like “you’re so annoying! You remind me of about all these things about myself a year ago I don’t like” and I think I’ve experienced both ends of that a lot of different times because of being in a generation where people are really fixated on identity and individuality that sometimes people who are really close friends who are trans also have versions of...comparing themselves to each other or wanting to be like “I’m different than you” or “I have my own story” or “are you better than me?” and all that stuff gets wrapped up in it along with all the stuff that’s about solidarity and closeness and illuminating your own identity through friend’s self discovery and stuff. So I don’t know, I think there’s a lot in there. Those are my general thoughts about it.

Silverman: Hi, we’re back.

Baer: Hi

Silverman: So I wanted to know more about your social media life and your relationship to making memes and creating those works that help form a more public self.

Baer: Yeah. Oh, that one’s so interesting. I’m glad you asked me about that because I think... so for context I have a meme account on Instagram—at the time this is being recorded I had a meme account on Instagram called @malefragility and I started making memes in private around the time I was thinking about transitioning but I don’t think I totally connected the two. I remember having breakfast with my friend Sylvia one day, I think she had a meme account at the time @meanslut666 which is now defunct sadly, but we were talking about memes...we had breakfast and about three hours into the breakfast hang were no longer looking at each other but just on our phones showing each other memes really fast and after a while she was like “Hannah, no one else will hang out with me and do this” and I was like “do you wanna see the memes I’ve made?” and she was like “you make memes?” and I was like “yeah, but I never showed [anyone]” and I showed her these memes she was like “these are incredible you have to post them” and I was like “I never would, I would never do that. Whatever, white people shouldn’t take up space in public, men shouldn’t take up space in public” and she was like “you’re being stupid, these memes are really cool. You having a meme account, it’s not like a scare marketplace on Instagram, like anyone can make an account.” So I made up this account and early on with it I was super, super, super, distanced from it identity-wise. I made it really unclear what my identity was as I was running it because I felt so much shame about being a white person and being over educated and an assigned male who was doing any kind of creative production at all because I thought it was wrong and I still feel really tortured about it actually, but one thing that happened

that was really instrumental in my transition was that I wasn't saying what my identities were I was just making content but then as I started getting followers the people who were following me were all trans people. And they were like "you're one of us" it was like this thing where people were like "we get you, we see you, we hear your voice" and it was actually this kind of incredible thing because I remember when my friend was like "do you wanna use they/them pronouns?" and I was like "I guess I'll try it" and then realizing so many of the people following me on Instagram around that account who were in dialogue with my work were asking the same questions and were just picking that up, not from me being like "I'm non-binary," actually just from the content of my thinking, like the content of my creative work and that was unbelievably validating. Like, I think about those old timely game shows/dating shows, like if you could only know about someone through their answers to a bunch of questions or something, like that people were connecting to me as a gender variant person without knowing anything about my gender identity and effectively for the first part of it when I was closeted that still people were like "we see you, we hear you, we wanna be connected to you in that way." So at this point now if you follow my meme account for like a month or if you look at my memes it's clear that they're made by a trans woman and I post pictures of myself on my Stories sometimes. I think that's part of it, that's cool, getting to feel...getting to experiment with what it's like to be visible when for so much of the past four years I've just felt gross being in public, like gross in my body, and not wanting anyone to look at me, but then I still have the same old complicated feelings about it. Like you're still able bodied, normatively attractive white person with a lot of class privilege who's like "I'm a cool artist" that's stupid—I still have a lot of guilt and shame about that, and confusion about if it can ever be healing or good really at the end of the day, and I know that some of that is just neurotic but I am tortured and I guess that I like... I've been working on this manuscript for the last year and a half about transition that a friend of mine asked me to write because they have an art book press and they were like "I like you memes and we're doing an imprint of text stuff, do you want to write a short book about anything?" and I had been journaling a lot about trans stuff and writing about different trans stuff and I told her I would do it but in this phase it's almost finished and I've just been feeling so squeamish about it being like I really don't want to appear in public in LA... it's really scary I think? And I feel unresolved about it.

Silverman: I guess translating to more of the material world, do you have everyday safety concerns?

Baer: I think in my early transition when I was still...I mean definitely, whatever, like yeah, I've been assaulted in public and had different scary experiences and like I think in a lot of spaces, I was recently road tripping through the South when I would be in a gas station late at night like you could get murdered right now and that's kind of the deal. I also think that it's important for me to remember that...I don't know like I had facial feminization surgery last year and that changed a lot for me, just like in terms of how often I pass—even if people give me a second look or are like "what's your deal gender wise?" they're less instinctively, like their transphobic rage is less immediately triggered by me now and I think if I get more...the more assimilated and passing I get the more that that will be different and I think that those choices are also in relation to that threat of violence but they're also in relation to my own—how it feels good to me and it's complicated to have those overlaid on top of each other and not be able to pull them apart. I

think it's also this generic feminist problem in this other way being like if people give you a hard time for not adhering to femme gender norms, like, is that just sexism? If you want to do the normative gender stuff or is it also part of your authentic self expression? I don't know. I feel safer in New York City than I do in a lot of other places and I also don't feel safe all the time. It's also hard to tell in this space how much of that is also just...it's one of those funny riddles about trans femininity, like when I was a little kid and I would just be walking around my hometown people would yell "faggot" out of the window of cars at me all the time but now when people non-consensually touch me in a club I'm not sure if it's because I'm passing and they're just treating me the way they treat cis women or if it's because of transphobia stuff, it's all mixed up and you don't exactly know why someone's harassing you or fucking with you when you're gender variant. I was talking about this recently because it isn't something that just happens to trans femme people, I was talking to a friend recently who's like non binary but is on T and is in the part of their process where they pass most of the time as a guy, but like a very delicate faggoty guy and they're like you know when I was read as a woman people didn't like fuck with me on the street but now people yell "faggot" at me all the time out of cars and scream at me and I think there's also this way that men are subject to violence in our culture and gender based violence and especially men of color in this world that I also can relate with as someone who was a gender variant boy for a lot of my life, and I think everyone just gets punishments and fucked with in different ways. That doesn't mean sexism doesn't exist or patriarchy doesn't exist but I think the weirdest part about this phase of my transition are these moments when I'm really passing and I'm just like "oh, you're just like a white woman now" like now you're just a dull white woman who has all of the intensity and oppressiveness and weirdness of that structural identity that has all of this weird...I don't know, that one I'm still wrestling with I think because of my mom being an intense white feminist I think there's a lot of weird stuff in her feminism that's about white womanhood or something? I don't know, that's vague but such a weird one.

Silverman: Do you have any advice for someone who's thinking about FFS? Any kinds of experience you'd like to share about going through that?

Baer: Yeah, I got it covered through insurance and I think that's something that's pretty...at least in 2017 was doable. I don't know, as the Affordable Care Act keeps getting fucked with, what the status of that stuff is now but I would recommend...one thing about being a public trans person on Instagram is that a lot of girls will DM me being like "will you promote my GoFundMe?" or "should I make a GoFundMe?" you know? And I think about getting FFS paid for in a lot of cases if you have any kind of mobility or any kind of skillset to move around bureaucracy that getting it covered through insurance is doable there's an organization called Transcend Legal who basically sues insurers who deny people trans-based healthcare coverage so if you have like a year, which is how long it takes anyways, you can get it paid for and not pay out of pocket. The other thing about it is that the culture of plastic surgery shit is really, really intense I think a lot of girls get into a really intense head space about it that has to do with sexism and perfectionism and body perfectability stuff, post-human stuff, for me it was really clear to me that I want to have this surgery done but I also don't want to have a life where I think about and dwell on plastic surgery all the time and so I also had to like—my frame for the process was there's this whole illusion where you're controlling your body but you're really just as out of control of your body as you

ever are of your body, it still doesn't belong to you and you can't control the outcome and it's not going to be perfect and try to let go of all of the different trans girls in the trans forum being like "this surgeon does fucked up stuff, this thing makes you look weird, this girl still looks like a man" I think all that stuff can be so toxic, I guess that's not an illustrative word, it's so...it stays with you and it doesn't necessarily help you actualize or get where you're going so try to take all of that with a grain of salt and stay focused on what would feel good to you and what your goals are.

Silverman: I guess I'll ask a few more questions. You mentioned writing a manuscript or a short book and I wanted to know if you could talk a little more about that or the experience of going through that and also in relation to being in therapy school, like about disclosure and all the ways you're forming all these multiple selves that are extended to these different networks.

Baer: Totally. I mean I think the manuscript started as sort of a diary and it ended up being about consciousness about cultural categories and identities and inhabiting them at the same time and that's really vague and not that helpful but I think that's one of the specific things I talk about in the book is this idea that identity categories have cultural or historical contingency, or that have cultural and historical context that defines what they are. So Foucault is like "in the nineteenth century we invented homosexuality" and that doesn't mean that before the nineteenth century there weren't men who fucked men but it means that in that time we decided that there was a category that was homosexual and started putting people in that category and I think that the category of trans woman has been scooped out over the course of the twentieth century and is getting more and more concretely named and identified in culture in this space with trans celebrities and trans awareness stuff and all of these different pieces and thinking about what it means to transition in the context of that. There's this other person who's kind of working in the tradition of Foucault who talks about how it doesn't make sense to talk about what schizophrenia was in the fifteen-hundreds because schizophrenia didn't exist, you know, even if someone had those symptoms it was just a totally different thing. The category is the illness, the illness isn't transhistorical or something? And so also thinking about transness as something that has historically been a medical diagnosis in the and being like this medical diagnosis was invented in this time to describe people like me and I have this feeling that is like ancestral, I know people like me existed throughout history and there are all these records of gender variant people in different cultures and trans feminine people in different cultures but what does it mean to have connection across time and history if you also know that your own perception of your own identity is intensely limited by what's happening in contemporary culture. So that's the driest or most abstract theoretical take of what the manuscript is about but mostly what it's actually about is doing drugs with my friends and what it felt like in my body in different phases of transition and I think I wrote it and decided to publish it because I thought it might be helpful to someone else who is going through some of that stuff. It'll come out sometime this year but I don't know when because I keep on delaying it because I'm feeling freaked out by it. That was the first part of your question but the second part was about multiple identities and different platforms, is that right?

Silverman: I guess about your relationship to vulnerability in relation to a public self that we've

already addressed through making memes and perhaps modulating between being a therapist— I guess it just is multiple in that you're writing a book and having interpersonal relationships.

Baer: Totally. I think I have some compartments I think the name that I use for the book is different from the name I use for therapy school. That just seems healthy also to have a little boundary. I don't know if that boundary will always hold, I post enough pictures of myself on my Instagram account that I'm already in a part of my life where if I'm in a big gay party usually someone says hi to me and is like "I know you though your meme account" or "do you run this meme account?" which is cute but actually if you're going to do therapy with queer young people in the next ten years this isn't going to go away, you know? So I have to think about it more, I think I'm still at the beginning of therapy stuff like I said before so I'm not in a private practice or something and the people I know who are like that are intensely private so I think it'll just be it's own...but I also think some of that stuff about privacy is—like the idea that a therapist should have a totally private life comes from a straight, monogamous, like whatever, that idea of neutral medical professionals, I don't if that model works in queer communities or works for queer and trans people anyways so I think is just something that...I don't know I had this conversation earlier this year with this trans woman who's a police officer in my hometown who my parents met and were like "you should hang out with Sharon" I was like "ok" but then I was like "ooh, I don't know if I want to hang out with a cop" but I also really want to meet her so we had coffee and I was like "what the fuck, what's your deal?" she was like "well..." she was basically like "we, being trans woman who have any kind of career, there is no one who came before you who did it." She was like there were other trans women but there weren't other trans woman police officers before me, in my department at least and no one is coming to help you but maybe someone will come after you and there's a lot of stuff you have to make it up as you go, you just have to decide and make it up. And so I feel that way a little bit about privacy stuff or multiple identity stuff where I'm like I want to be able to exist as a trans woman and be in the queer community but I also want to be a therapist and I don't those things are mutually exclusive but I think they have been in some cases historically for other people doing therapy because of other assumptions that a built into like when you're fifty and supposed to be married and rooted in your private life and not ever go to queer parties and all the people I know who are fifty in New York who seem cool go out a lot you know, so it's just going to be different, it'll be weird but I don't totally know what it's going to be like either.

Silverman: Do you have anything else you feel like sharing right now? Before we do our game?

Baer: Well, I guess one thing is just like, if you're listening and you're a trans person or if you're like "am I a trans person?" or if you're thinking about that stuff that the thing that absolutely helped me the most in my process was just to hang out with other people who were gender variant in some way and just talk to them about it and I think that that's the one most helpful thing for me was just to find other people were asking the same questions and being like "what are you thinking about? Like where are you in your process?" and just being really curious and having those relationships and those connections. If there's any wisdom I have it's find your friends and do it, be ruthless. DM people, DM strangers on the internet, fucking go to parties where you don't know anyone, just try to find them however you can.

Silverman: Ok, so now we're gonna play a short pop psy quiz, well, I don't if we're playing it we're enacting it. We'll just try it out it's called the cute game.

Baer: Ok.

Silverman: So I need you to close your eyes and I need you to visualize a desert.

Baer: Ok.

Silverman: And the desert is just sand, the horizon, and the sky. Can you see that?

Baer: Mmhmm

Silverman: Ok, I'm going to ask you to place a few things in the desert and after you see one thing and I ask you to see another thing they just all build within the same frame, so they all exist in the same space.

Baer: Ok.

Silverman: You're looking at the sand and the sky right now, I want you to picture a cube.

Baer: Ok.

Silverman: Can you tell me what it looks like?

Baer: Yeah, it's really big and the texture is kind of brown-ish like the wings of a moth but it's shifting and also kind of looks like wood grain sometimes but mostly like the wings of a moth and it takes up...two-thirds of it are in the sand pane and then it crosses the horizon and then about a third of it is in the sky pane.

Silverman: Is it centered or off to the side?

Baer: It's in the middle.

Silverman: So is it grounded or is it buried? Or is it...

Baer: It's just on the sand. It's on the surface of the sand, yeah.

Silverman: Now leave the cube where it is, in the desert where it is, in the sky where it is. Ok, do you picture a ladder?

Baer: Yeah.

Silverman: Ok, where is the ladder?

Baer: It's like leaning against the cube. Like if you were in the sand you could climb on top of the cube and it's not centered it's about a third of the way over and it's a wooden ladder and the rungs are like cylinders and it's tall because the cube's really big.

Silverman: Now I want you to picture a horse.

Baer: Ok.

Silverman: Where is the horse?

Baer: It's just walking around, it's in the sand. Near the cube but not next to it, kind of to the left of it. Just in the desert, doing its own thing.

Silverman: Does it have any other attributes?

Baer: It's brown and it has white near its feet and it has a saddle on but not a bridle and no one's riding it, no one's on it and just kind of on its own, smelling stuff and walking around.

Silverman: Ok, now I want you to picture flowers. Do you see them?

Baer: Mmhmm.

Silverman: Where are they?

Baer: They're covering the entire desert, they're everywhere. The entire desert floor is pink and white flowers, stretching to the horizon, and the horse is smelling them and they go up against the edges of the cube and the ladder and everything is green with these pink and white impossibly vivid flowers. They're so bright.

Silverman: And the last thing I want you to picture is a storm.

Baer: Ok.

Silverman: Where is that?

Baer: It's far away, swirling in the sky in the distance, kind of near the horizon. It's this purple-ish bruisey color, it's twisting but really far off.

Silverman: Wow, thank you. I think we'll discuss what all the symbols mean off air so that it doesn't disrupt someone else's experience with the game. Thank you, Hannah.

Baer: Thank you Aviva.