

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

THOMAS PAGE MCBEE

Interviewer: Claire Crews

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Claire Crews: Hello, my name is Claire and I will be having a conversation with Thomas Page McBee for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's community oral history project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is, uh—Tuesday November 12th, 2019 and this is being recorded at the New York Public Library Manhattan branch. Hi.

Thomas Page McBee: Hi [laughter]

Crews: Thanks for doing this.

McBee: Of course, yeah.

Crews: Let's begin with your name, age and where you were born.

McBee: Mmh hmm. Uh so, my name is Thomas Page McBee, [laughter] that's my full name. I'm 37—yes. Not the age where I don't know how old I am anymore. I am 37 and I was born in Hickory, North Carolina.

Crews: And did you grow up in Hickory?

McBee: No. I uh, my family moved when I was 4 to Bali, North Carolina and then pretty soon after that we moved to the Pittsburgh area, Pennsylvania, and that's where I spent most of my entire youth until I was 18.

Crews: Okay. What was Pittsburgh like in the 80's, 90's?

McBee: It was, yeah, it was mid to late 80's and most of the 90's I was there. It was an interesting place to be from. Like, my mom's whole family is from central Pennsylvania so in some ways it felt kind of familiar to her, but also different, which she liked. She always felt like there was a lot of culture in Pittsburgh compared to, you know, it's an apartment sized city which is actually true, but at that time most people didn't know that. Like it had a really great ballet company, and theatre companies and symphony, all those things were really important to my mom. It was still—the town itself, the state, was still very much still recovering from all kinds of industrial Midwest type of depression things that had happened after the clash of industry, so it was sort of an interesting place that the Carnegies had had such a huge impact on the area, so it was beautiful libraries and museums and a lot of philanthropy around arts and culture. But also at the same time there had been a lot of—I guess what people would call [inaudible] and people leaving and I never questioned that I had to leave Pittsburgh—you know? For that reason I think as a queer person—I mean, I was out as queer my whole life so for any from the time a person could have a sexuality, for me I was around 14. I grew up aware of being different and it didn't feel like a place at the time where I felt like I had a huge future just because every queer person I knew left, you know? Although, actually I did come back after college and I worked for a couple of years at the Andy Warhol museum and really rediscovered Pittsburgh and since then have spent a lot

of time going back there for various reasons and its changed, but also I didn't know it as well as I thought I did as a kid, you know?

Crews: Yeah?

McBee: There were a lot more resources and people and stuff going on that I really understood. But actually all throughout high school I had all these friends at this private high school that wasn't my high school that was in Pittsburgh that much more progressive, so I actually grew up with a lot of queer people around me which was at this totally different school that wasn't my school. So, I still had my time like taking the bus and eventually taking a car, going to drive and hanging out with all these queer kids in this cool progressive school that wasn't mine.

Crews: You were in public high school?

McBee: Yeah, I was in public high school, and I was from right outside Pittsburgh, a smaller town just down the river. So my town was like, proximate, but definitely not Pittsburgh itself even so Pittsburgh was like the city. And then this school had like—it just felt like a very sophisticated perspective, which it kind of did actually. There were a lot of out gay kids there and I mean, this was the 90's, this was unusual. So, I think early on I realized that there was a lot more—there was a lot more than Pittsburgh itself and there was also a lot more people in the city, you know? I really—I spent a lot of time also going to New York when I could so that was fun.

Crews: Yeah, what would gay teens do—like socially?

McBee: There was an all ages club that we spent a lot of time going to, it was very that era you know?

Crews: What was it called?

McBee: Pegasus

Crews: Pegasus?

McBee: It was in downtown Pittsburgh, which was at the time just like low. It was just like nothing was there. It was just a couple juice stands and—there was nothing in the downtown area. And there was this gay club. The gay club had a cage where you could be underage and be in this non—alcoholic area separate from the adults. But it was cool because really everyone went there. They went there and everyone went to the piano bar, which technically I think you probably had to be 21 to get into, but we were [inaudible] about that. I've seen that movie small town gay bar and it kind of felt like that, there was just a kind of—I mean I really credit it coming from there in the sense of have an intersexual experience of queerness. I was around gay men and who were of a certain stripe and age and lesbians who were of a certain stripe and age and young people and it was just—I don't know how many trans people I knew, or people I understood were trans, but I think there was some gender diversity. It was just sort of like there

weren't very many of us so we just all had to stick together kind of situation you know? I was a pretty masculine looking kid so I fit in with the lesbians and the gay men kind of felt like they understood me and I felt like I had an intergenerational experience, pretty young like what was possible, which I really credit to Pittsburgh, so that was a very cool thing to experience. My high school friends and I would go to these different places and we would also go to warehouse shows, because that was big back then, and there were all these huge warehouse spaces that we could go to, there was actually very cool music. And raves, which were really big back then and we would go to those. So sort of off the grid stuff and these sites of public LGBTQ experience that were actually accommodating for young people. So that's kind of the stuff we would do in groups. And then I had a gay best friend—my best friend growing up was a gay guy, so we were often together and he ended up getting really involved in hanging out with these people who were at this school too. So like, we went to the same high school but we spent all of our time at this other high school. So that was kind of nice to have a partner in.

Crews: Cool, um were you into writing in high school?

McBee: Yeah, I started writing when I was 9 because I had a teacher who that was sort of her whole thing, like she wanted us to write poetry and that was for whatever reason—I actually never understood why that was so important to her, but she was very invested in that. So she would have us write poetry and I really took to it. It was a very challenging time in my life, I came from a trauma background in my family and that was a period when all of that was being exposed and so writing was a great outlet for me. She was really supportive of it and she had this whole story, which I still—I don't even want to know if its true—but she said that she had this daughter who she said was a soap star—a soap opera star, in New York and if you had a poem that she really loved. She would walk you down the hall to where the fax machine was and [laughter] send the poem by fax to Hillary, her daughter in New York City, the soap star. Now I'm thinking about it and I've thought about it since obviously, and was that really happening? What did this woman make of all these poems she was getting from third graders? Or maybe it was all true, you know? It felt very special. So that's why I started writing and I was lucky that my mom really encouraged me to continue that. I think she saw that it was a creative outlet for me that was helpful and I was a kid who was different for many reasons and had a lot that I was dealing with so I was lucky to have a lot of support and I also got really interested in film around the same time—a few years later. I was writing from 9 on and I did a lot of enrichment programs and that sort of thing and after school stuff. I skipped a grade, I skipped 7th grade like the humanities side of 7th grade and got to go to helm school half the day every day all through basically middle school and high school so I graduated from helm school when I was in high school which was really cool. In the summers I would do a lot of creative writing, there was a free government—I didn't only do free things—but there was a governor's school for the arts that was open to anyone if you got in and went for five weeks and it was like anyone and everyone in Pennsylvania could apply so I did that sort of thing like summer enrichment with other kids who were weird and artistic. So I think something my mom did really well was try to show me it was a big world and try to connect me to people who were outside of this limited world that I was in and I really internalized that. That you had to look outside your most immediate environment sometimes if you're not copasetic with the people around you. It's through the arts where I was able to do that the most I think.

Crews: What were you making work about? What were your early thorns or writing like? [laughter]

McBee: I mean, it's obviously so embarrassing, but like [laughter] Well, I wrote poetry so that's what I got into governor's school for, It was sectioned off, there was poetry and fiction—there were ten people in poetry and ten people in fiction. I got into governor's school for poetry and I was really committed to poetry. I think it was something that was very innate to me, I really understood that way of thinking. I actually had to learn, I had to teach myself how to write prose in undergrad. I did that by taking my narrative poems and working them into fiction, like faculty advisor, to just literally turn them into stories. We would painstakingly for my thesis went through—I collected all these poems that I'd written that were narrative and turned them into prose thesis and I ended up going to grad school for fiction based on that. [laughter] And then I kind of had to work on my fiction based on that. That's sort of the story of my life , it's a lot of wanting to write in across formats because it's interesting and then jumping in and being like "*oh man, I've got to figure out how to actually do this*". But I was doing journals also in undergrad so that helped. In high school I was writing poems, they were very memoir just sort of things that I was dealing with or thinking about. And then my shows were—I mean, I don't know, I was very serious about it and I won a couple children's competitions and that sort of thing, but in retrospective it was a lot of feminist films about the beauty myth and the stuff that I was reading, that I was like yeah. It was very interesting even as a young person I, um, gender. I knew my gender was different and I felt a very strong allegiance to women and I also felt very aware that I wasn't having quite the same experience as the women in my life but I understood the parallels between their experience and my experience. Being queer and masculine I think also, it was an identity that made some sort of sense, but I think, I don't know. In some ways—kind of oddly actually—having all that support and place to express myself maybe in a good way allowed me to think a lot longer and a lot more deeply about my gender and through art and through a creative process. And being around people who were different than me but also maybe in some ways made it take longer for me to really understand that it wasn't just that I was masculine and queer, but that I was actually a man, which in a way was sort of surprising for me to realize that about myself. And partially because of being in this creative community and having a lot of latitude for expression is a lot of the way.

Crews: where did you move to go to undergrad?

McBee: Oh! Boston. I went to Emerson College in Boston. I went to school initially for writing and film and then it was too challenging to double major. At the time the school didn't have—now it seems obvious—but like a film/writing—it was a professional school but it did not have a way to write or film, it was just a directing kind of track or there was a writing track, so I stayed on the writing track. And then I got invested in journals, kind of by accident. I did an internship I think in my freshman year at the local Alt Weekly and I found a—I was sort of doing the listings or whatever, and somehow I found out about this issue with the gay-straight alliance at Boston University school and the chancellor at Boston university and the high school. This guy named John Silver, he had been blocking the school's ability to create gay-straight alliances—or he had

done something. He either undermined them or blocked them—something had happened so initially I was supposed to write a quick story but then the editors were like, this is like—actually you need to write an investigative piece of journalism. I had no idea how to do that so they kind of mentored me through in a very serious way, these people really knew journalism, so I kind of had this, like everything else in my life, a kind of on the ground training by fire or whatever as I wrote this story that in retrospect again, could have really blown back on this paper. They could have been sued for—it could happen if it hadn't gone well, they could have been sued for liable or all kinds of those things. But they really trusted me and helped me write that story and it was a cover story. It just felt really cool, so I think that really helped me cement my interest in writing and other forms and maybe gave me the confidence to say I want to learn to write prose in general and then I got into fiction. Boston was an interesting place actually, for queer life.

Crews: Yeah, say more. [laughter]

McBee: well, it's interesting because for the first few years I was there I didn't find anyone and Emerson was not—there are a lot of gay men at Emerson but there weren't people who were—I didn't know a lot of queer people outside of that experience and not a lot of people like me in general. I ended up having a lot of friends who went to school with me, but at the time I felt very different from the people who I was around. I was in the honors program there, which was just this—I don't know—a seminar that they did every semester so we can a whole cohort that you did humanities with because I didn't want to be at a school that didn't have humanities so that was the way that that happened there. You got a scholarship and you worked as a cohort with these other people, so I became very close to these people from actually all kinds of backgrounds, it was very cool. But that was like—you know, Emerson is in the middle of Boston, there is no campus really, so in terms of campus life there wasn't really any. I didn't really feel like I found my place really in Boston until I started working at this queer coffee shop called Desal Cafe, which was in Summerville. Do you know it?

Crews: I know it.

McBee: This was 2000 to 2003ish, that I worked there and it was just a very sort of the height of coffee shop culture and this was in Summerville which has become a very big, cool place to live but at the time it was like Tops was out there but there wasn't really much else. Everything in Boston was right where the colleges were. Tops, it was on the red line so it was kind of accessible but there was a bit of a further stroll than more central Boston, but I ended up really loving working there and I maybe moved there first, I can't remember if we—I moved in with a few friends and I can't remember if we had found the place first or if we found the job first but it all sort of lined up. So, I was living in the neighborhood and working in this coffee shop which became a really big queer gathering place in Boston, particularly for people who were you know—it was more for people who were lesbians and allies than maybe I would say queer people—queer identifying people of all genders than necessarily the gay man kind of scene which was very different. So I spent a lot of time working at this place, but also it was one of those places there was a huge social life attached to the cafe and there was a lot of parties and everybody who was queer coming out there. I was a great way to meet people and there was like

thirty coworkers who I had. It was very much I felt like suddenly in a very vibrant community after a few years of feeling like “*where is the community?*” So that was really cool. And I also went to Man Ray a lot which was the dance place in Boston. I think it’s still around [laughter] maybe I’m not sure, but I’ve seen it referenced in other people’s work about that time and it was definitely the LGBTQ place to go and dance and be out all night and it felt like a really safe place where all kinds of different people. That was my sort of queer life in Boston. I think. I might be missing something but that was the most of it.

Crews: After that you stay in Boston after graduating?

McBee: No, then I went back to Pittsburgh. I didn’t really know what I wanted to do exactly next and I had a girlfriend at the time and I think she also didn’t really know so we just decided Pittsburgh could be kind of cool, I don’t know. I don’t remember why we thought that versus something else. I think we weren’t ready for New York and if you’re in Boston it’s either you are going to New York or in our case LA because a lot of people at Emerson got internships in LA, that kind of part of what they did, but they were the film side. So, everyone we knew was kind of going to New York or LA or stay in Boston which neither of us really wanted so Pittsburgh just seemed like there is a mid-sized city solution here. So I went back to Pittsburgh and it was great, like I said it was a very different experience working at the Warhol, it was amazing. I started in visitor services but I got attracted to be an artist educator and I loved that and I ended up doing that for a couple of years and finding that I love teaching and working with—you know when we did community programs we did with high school kids nearby. Also I think I found that sort of cultural critique piece of art could be a really interesting way to conduit to talk about social issues that the Warhol museum itself did a great job of collecting the connections to whatever—you know there was a death penalty exhibit for example [inaudible] electric chairs. I remember a lot of things like that. We really engage these big social issues through this art. There was actually so much stuff that it was actually pretty easy to find things of relevance in that way. That was really helpful to me actually, that really that art didn’t have to be—I mean I knew it—but to really get that you could make work and show people work that felt salient and part of what was happening right now and that art can be a way to communicate ideas about social progress. I felt that I saw that really clearly there and it was really cool. They also had amazing public programs and brought in a lot of people from York and from other places. So, it just felt like a very different—You know Pittsburgh ended up being a lot more, like you said, interesting and full than I even thought. The Warhol was like, its own place. Its founded by the DEA foundation that is obviously connected to the DEA in New York. It had much more of a cultural exchange with the city I think than anywhere else. So that was cool.

Crews: Were you involved in organizing work at the time?

McBee: Yeah, so in Boston I co-ran this open mic called Cadesh, which became —it itself was an offshoot of an open mic called Cadesh that was started in San Francisco. I guess I left this all out, but I became friends with Michelle Tea. in Boston arounds that time, when I was maybe a sophomore in college. That happened because—so let’s see—I got involved with Cadesh because of this woman Sarah Seinberg, who went to the MFA school for photography and she had lived

in San Francisco—she was a few years older than me. She had been part of this queer literary community in San Francisco. I think I showed up at her open mic Cadesh, which was the offshoot of the Cadesh in San Francisco and she liked me. She liked my writing or something, so then she said will you cohost this with me. Which felt like a big deal [laughter] I was like nineteen. It was the also the time of open mics, so this was a real grass roots effort to bring together queer community around writing. So, I did that with Sarah in Boston for I think two years or three years. I also met Michelle when she came through town. I kind of got connected to this much bigger queer community that was sort of centered in San Francisco but then it sort of disbanded in some ways. So that's a big piece. When I moved to Pittsburgh, me and my ex, we went to a couple other art events and public events in Boston and I really liked doing that. So, when we moved to Pittsburgh, I started Cadesh Pittsburgh with my ex and that was something that we did at an art studio basically there. It kind of became a big deal, it was on the cover of local papers and that sort of thing and my mom came sometimes and brought cookies for everyone [laughter] which was really cute. It was fun to be part of—Pittsburgh was going through this revitalization and now it's totally become gentrification, but at the time it was revitalization that was actually pretty sorely needed because there was basically just bonked out strips where no one was doing anything or even living in, so the city was subsidizing artists who wanted to buy houses if they would make the first floor into a gallery. It was something like if you create a gallery and you keep it operational for three years or something, then they would forgive you or pay you for anything left on your home loan or something like that. Which was a pretty cool deal, so a lot of people were moving back. That was including the place where we were having this event. It was sort of an interesting time to be there and be part of a change in the city, but then again I had such a different dynamic from before and to be a part of the queer community there, and to create a queer community there in any wing, that sort of brought back that piece of it. That's mostly what I did in Pittsburgh, worked at the Warhol and did my own kind of events around writing and queer literary stuff.

Crews: Did you have a continuing writing practice at that time?

McBee: Yeah, I did. I remember I felt like I was trying to—I started writing prose and I was still learning kind of how to do it and I was doing some journalized writing for the city paper and trying to write. You know, I was applying to grad school in fiction at some point so I must have been trying to write for that, trying to kind of create the prose that I needed to do that and I was really still learning, so yeah I was. I was reading at this book night, it was sort of like—I was trying to figure out still how to write in this new way and I was doing—I was engaging publicly and I was doing some journalism and those were kind of main ways I was writing at the time. It's sort of wild to talk about how you got to where you got because I never thought about these interconnected themes before. Yeah.

Crews: Yeah, and connected communities it sounds like.

McBee: Yeah and how much I've—I mean, I've always known how much I've been deeply engaged in queer community, but sometimes laying it out like this just, like, wow. I really haven't known anything else you know. Which is cool.

Crews: Yeah, and you ended up in San Francisco...

McBee: So I applied to—I was getting together a sort of grad school application very broadly but I didn't—I like looked at a few places. I didn't really know where I wanted to go or what I wanted. I remember looking really closely at the University of Minnesota actually really feeling interested in that program. And the really surprising kind of fell apart so that kind of allow me to be more open and then honestly I liked [inaudible]. That's kind of why it's not there. [laughter] I mean, I liked Minnesota state's program you know, I feel like I applied to it just so I would have a reason to move honestly, you know, like it. But I also kind of felt like with grad school, maybe this was a real miscalculation, but it felt like after a certain point all it seems many of them seemed equally interesting. And it kind of seems like I don't even know what kind of thing I'm trying to write. So maybe just within this galaxy of options, like when I left my life kind of lead me. I don't know, I had this kind of dynamic was interesting because I knew all these people that I was talking about earlier who lives there, and this was between levels. So it was an interesting time to be in San Francisco. There had been a big exodus of New Yorkers actually, and moved there around the time I did. So it's sort of interesting. It was like 2004, 2005 and so was sort of an interesting time to be there. So I think I was attracted to it because I kind of had an idea about it. I really didn't want to stay in Pittsburgh even though I thought I was at a fork in the road with living there, I almost felt like I either needed to like almost like kind of commit to a professional track because I had the best job I could imagine. And I realized that if I was staying in Pittsburgh, I wanted to stay at the Warhol it is an amazing place. But I think I just wasn't really ready to see the people around me settle down, really. I was in my early 20s and I just felt like I don't think I'm ready to be in my home town settling down at a good job at a museum, even though I, for years afterwards I hoped that was the right choice because it was such a great situation. But I think I wanted to be back in the bigger world, you know, so then I went to San Francisco, and I did apply to SF state and got in. I think I went sort of knowing that I was going to school there, I can't remember exactly, but I'm pretty sure I got in and then went. I moved there and just started at SF state, which is interesting.

Crews: Was your literary community there? Because of knowing Michelle Tea [inaudible] see, like, wider than the gay community?

McBee: Yes. Though a very cool thing about at least at that time. I'm pretty sure this isn't this can't be true because, you know, it just was a moment there. It was more affordable to live in San Francisco than I think it has been since for sure. And maybe even had been for quite some time because of the first bubble and then the bursting of that bubble. So, it was a relatively affordable city. And, you know, it felt like it was full of artists, it just felt like everybody was an artist or writer. So a very cool thing about it was that I would go to my program and then I would be with my friends from my program at school. But then I feel like there's a ton of readings and just all the time there were readings at bars up and down the mission. And they were always interconnected with my career and community. I mean, there wasn't really this kind of—it felt almost seamless and a very cool thing about being in San Francisco in general. I think that certainly back then was straight people had to kind of just get with it, they just had to be down

with queer culture and that was truly like I mean, it really is. At the time anyway it was a town ran by queer people like where people it felt like. So I felt like there wasn't really, it was almost surprising in the first couple of years to discover that I could be at a Liquica event that, you know, which was like a big literary festival every year. And they would have to say this call thing were you went to reading, to reading, to reading. It's like I see everybody I knew from the programs from my queer community and they were getting together at things and they knew each other. And that was the feeling of it. And Michelle was like the queen, you know, not just a queer literary community, in San Francisco but really, you know, when she moved to LA it was such a dramatic thing for people because she was such a figure of San Francisco in general and I think her and other people like Rebecca Solnit, these people, they all as different as they were, they all felt connected to each other and would often be at the same events. She ran this, Michelle ran this great [inaudible] called Radar, which is part of how I think I ended up wanting to come to San Francisco. She invited me and my ex when I was still in Pittsburgh to come off reading radar. The San Francisco Public Library, And I was like, this is so cool. She's this sort of—I knew Michelle a little bit socially and then coming and doing this thing and seeing like the library sort of putting this big stamp of approval on her outsider, queer punk, you know, literary aesthetic. It really made me realize that San Francisco was a place where, you know, at the time anyway. You could really come still be yourself in a creative way and a queer gender way and the city would really embrace you. And that was true at least then.

Crews: Where were some of your favorite spaces? Bookstores, bars, that you hung out at a lot?

McBee: Yeah, I think I spent most of my time really in the mission in terms of all of that, because it was all kind of together, like there's a bookstore, dogeared books that I spent a lot of time in. I mean, I think there was like there is a Lexington, obviously, which is like lesbian club that I—before transition spent time in and also where I watch trans men have to sort of navigate, integrate. I mean, that was also this big flashpoint in the mid to late aughts of what felt like a lot of people transitioning kind of the same time, or at least like a lot of awareness about trans men in particular. And I think in some way, San Francisco was a real center for that. And the things that came out of community, you know, productive and conflicts around lesbian spaces and trans men. And, you know, I was in the middle of all that and I still hadn't transitioned myself. I did have top surgery in 2009. So, which I didn't know anyone else who'd done that who wasn't playing yet formally the transition. So, I don't know. It was like an interesting time that, you know. I finished grad school in 2009. So, the last in the last half of the aughts, I was going to a lot of literary related events at bars and that sort of thing, and also maintaining a related queer community. But towards the end of my time in San Francisco, as I was kind of thinking about gender a lot more and trying to figure myself out, it was it was an interesting time because it felt like very odd for everyone. In a way that I think the rest of the country was not—maybe in New York, I don't know, but it just felt like it was there was a lot of conversations happening there that I don't necessarily think were happening in other places, particularly around trans masked folks and lesbianism, the dynamic between it was I like *“where have all the butches gone?”* that whole vibe. And it's very interesting to be part of that sort of bearing witness to it and myself, not really knowing where I fell in all of the lines of that so that was my sort of experience in Lexington, but I'm trying to think of where else. I mean, was a place called like the Budivist social club or

something like that? There's like a lot of like cool little bars that were just up and down, you know, Valencia that I [inaudible] and I always lived outside the city. I lived in Oakland pretty much the whole time I was definitely the whole time I was in the area. But I lived in—I tried really hard. My partner at the time and I tried really hard to never live in a place that was actually gentrifying, which actually was possible back then. So I was living in like the Piedmont area, which was sort of this—I don't know if you're familiar, but it's this, yeah. At the foot of the Piedmont Hills. Kind of just this cute little villagey, part of Oakland that, you know, there's just sort of middle class, but you could get an apartment for cheap but near Atencisco, which was actually gentrifying in a way that I don't know. There's just a lot of like kind horrifying stuff happening around gentrification. And I say horrifying because I mean, literally in both financially, there's ways that are sort of being incentivized to rent spaces and then the city was basically using that to develop the spaces and then jacking up the rent to the point that they couldn't afford to still live there. It was all very like, yeah, they would make a base for areas and they would just turnover really quickly, it was disturbing to watch, and it's horrifying as the crime rates were—crime and the kind of crime that was happening was—that it's like just I had a friend who had a guy like sleep under her bed, break into her house and sleep under her bed. I knew about a person who was held up by a machine—or not a machine but some sort of giant assault rifle. And I myself was attacked at gunpoint in a really terrifying mugging. So I just felt like there was a lot of unrest and it felt like a lot of that had to do with the politics of how the city is handling gentrification, pushing people out of their homes and the drug epidemic that they never resolved, probably introduce themselves as the area and all that. So that part was really upsetting to us. Yeah.

Crews: Why did you move away from San Francisco?

McBee: I moved away in 2011, which is also the year I began my transition and I moved to Providence Rhode Island with my ex. We were still together, I had already started my transition socially right before I left. I let people know and then by—I planned on beginning my medical transition in Boston at Fenway I lived in Providence. There's an hour commute but I was working in Boston Phoenix so he got a job at the Phoenix Forum, before he moved back to the east coast.

Crews: [inaudible] at the time?

McBee: Well, at the time, I was—I had a frustrating experience with—as much as now I feel like I gained so much for getting my amount of fame, I felt like I didn't have the best luck with literary publications. So I was in San Francisco, I was struggling to get published in sort of literary magazines, sort of classic sense that you're supposed to. I felt very annoyed by the whole thing and even though I was like doing all this, you know, literary things that go into these events, readings and stuff like I just—I wasn't—I just I never quite jelled with just kind of just the way in which it's done, you know, a literary world. So I've written a few pieces, like I wrote for, I wrote about the people who fish off the Berkeley piers, for like earthy magazine or whatever, that sort of thing. And then the big turning point for me was right after I finished grad school, I was feeling frustrated about the staff and my partners said, you know, if you could if you could write anything right now. Don't even think about it, just answer, what would you write. I said a modern love for The New York Times, which I think what I really was trying to say is I want to write something

that will reach people, I want to write something that's like—I don't think that just because something is Poppy, it's not literary, you know. I don't know. I just had this really strong—maybe I was just rebelling or something, but I really wanted to write something broad. And so, I did. And that that in 2011 that was published, the Body of Love was published and then he moved right after that to Providence. So then when I started at the Phoenix, I really started at the bottom in terms of like journalism jobs. I hadn't had an actual job in journalism, I just freelanced that an internship or two and get some articles. So, I got a [inaudible] job, which is great, actually. So, the first year I was in Phoenix for six months, maybe I just did copy editing and fact checking and some writing for them and then they moved me to editor roll on the [inaudible] desk. So, I then I was doing a lot of writing about just like stuff going on. I did a lot of film reviews, a lot of like—I remember interviewing Jennifer Egan and I got to talk to all kinds of really interesting writers and people because the Phoenix had such a reputation, it was like so many amazing—Susan Arlene, I believe and all kinds of interesting people got their start there and it really had this like institutional power that I think a lot of alt weekly's didn't, so the people who I could get on the phone to talk to me were amazing and it was great. So, I spent a couple of years at the Phoenix doing that kind of thing [inaudible] sort of reporting mostly. And then we did do a queer issue that I largely organized and edited without the rest of the team. And so, yeah, I did that for I think it was like—maybe it was three years that I was at the Phoenix. You shudder at some point in the process, we got to be there for the end [laughter], which is actually kind of interesting, actually. I mean, it really was interesting point to see sort of the fall of print journalism. It was sad, but I kind of felt like Forrest Gump a little bit, like I've been at these places at these exact moments when these big social shifts have been happening. Maybe it's because I keep inserting myself into them but regardless it's been really cool. Yeah.

Crews: What was it like to be transitioning during that time, with that job?

McBee: Yeah, well, so the other thing I was doing, I guess I didn't mention this, is I was freelancing, they let me freelance for like the Atlantic and BuzzFeed, LGBT and like all of the advice. So the big thing that was happening and I you and I wrote about this some for the Phoenix, but because I was [inaudible] they sort of were like, you know, it's cool if you want to write about non arts related stuff elsewhere. But as I was transitioning, it was like the recession had happened in 2009, so what was happening 2011, was what people were calling the the masculinity crisis and it was a global—it was a global economic event, the things people were pointing out about the masculinity crisis were things I felt I was experiencing myself in my transition socially. So, you know, there was so much about, let's say, the loneliness epidemic and the way men were—all these things that now I know are called Gandalf's behaviors, but they were just being sort of framed through—They were framed unquestioningly, like the actual innateness of the masculine behaviors, which were not questioned, but the fallout was sort of presented in this gendered way because of the way they tied masculinity and work together, for example. So then losing jobs, the marriage market's crumbling and all of these things were just—there's no questioning that inherent gender underneath it all. So, it was weird because I felt like I was going through this transition. In a place that—so Boston's a great town in terms of being liberal, but it's not necessarily a place that's super diverse or at least super mixed in its diversity, I should say. And there are queer and trans people there for sure, and then we're back then, but I don't know, it

felt like it's a place it's much more regionally, in my experience is it's sort of like your regional identity is more important. And everything else is sort of secondary. And I didn't have that regional identity really, like I wasn't from the mainland. And so, I didn't have that in common. And so even though I appreciated that there is a sense of some diversity in every group I was in because people were very bossy, especially in Phoenix. I didn't have that background and then I was also transitioning, so I felt like I was surrounded by a lot of supportive people and a lot of real loss in politics, the liberal loss of politics who wanted to see me succeed. But I didn't feel like I had a lot in common with them. And also, I was really trying to unbraided this whole masculinity crisis thing and write about it. It was at a point in time, especially with Obama being in the White House and everything, it just felt like—and it was before really the quote 'trans tipping point' or sort of leading up to that. I had the first interview besides New Yorker Laverne Cox [inaudible] when that came out, we had published the stories the same week. So that was happening and there was like—and BuzzFeed LGBT, was doing great stuff and so, I don't know. There was like kind of this straight or kind of like queer trans stuff going on that was really progressive and interesting and transvisibility. And yet I was experiencing at the same time, a really dissonant experience of social gender and trying to write about that and explain it and talk about it and feel like in a way, nobody knew what I was talking about. People were kind of like, it's just good you're trans, a little bit, I felt. So again, I worked for the Atlantic, like I just I was writing these pieces about trying to focus on men who weren't trans necessarily who were thinking about this stuff or doing work around this. And I found a whole community of like people who have domestic violence prevention, who were doing healthy masculinity's work and so I tried to kind of shine the spotlights on them and just try to understand with everything because I felt like at least they were talking about the same stuff I was talking about. So, I guess my time in Boston felt like in many ways I kind of learned how to report on this feat of like masculinity, which nobody really, I think solved. But I did and I was also part of, like, you know, transvisibility, I guess, and trying to like, you know, think about that, like what's happening with all these new sort of storylines about trans people and sort of writing about the trans narratives and I was wrangling with myself because I didn't really relate to most of them and I got really interested in—you know, why are we so focused on trans kids what does that mean, and what are the stories we have been telling about trans people and how have those narratives disrupted me and whose lenses are being applied to those narratives. All of that I was thinking about and writing about for many publications. And I was also writing my own, my first memoir, which I wrote on the train back and forth to work, which was like an hour commute. Mostly I read on trains on weekends and stuff. So, you're really rich on time but a lot of different strains of things going on.

Crews: Sure. The train between was that the train between Boston and Providence?

McBee: Yeah. It is like an hour. I still wish I could have that kind of. I wish I had something like that again because at first it was so frustrating to do that, but then over time after time, it was just, amazing. My brain would literally just turn on at 8:00 or whatever I'd sit down, I'd write, and then when I came back at 6:30 and got back on the train again or whatever the time was. It's like my brain just knew, like these are these two hours day that you'd write. You really did. It is the morning I would write and in the afternoon I would edit and then I would write on weekends,

but it really was cool and consistent process. In a way I have not been able to replicate since [inaudible].

Crews: Well, were you writing on computer or a notebook?

McBee: On the computer on the commuter rail, I was quite a quiet car. It was really perfect, actually.

Crews: That's amazing [laughter]. What part of providence were you living in?

McBee: Oh, the West Side of Providence. I'm trying to remember what the street was called Louie Fuller? I don't remember. It was over by—what's that bar that's kind of cool, really, for—yeah, over there, like a couple blocks from that place. Yeah. It was great, Providencean is a cool town. Like there is a lot of it is actually a nice balance to Boston. I think Providence had four restaurants and bars and, in some ways, a more sort of radical community. That felt a little more familiar to me, and Boston obviously had more amenities and more opportunities, career wise stuff so it was kind of a nice mix between the two places.

Crews: When did you come to New York?

McBee: So, I came to New York—the Phoenix shuttered in like 2014? No 2013, something like that. 2013, I think. And I worked for a few months doing some consulting and doing some like, doing my freelancing and finishing the book. And then the relationship, I was in, was also sort of falling apart at that point and I knew I wasn't going to stay in Providence started to find new jobs in New York and kind of randomly like I came out for a job interview. The first place really that said, I want to talk to you, it was a place called Policy that became Mike. And this was when they were first around, so it was kind of this was 2000—it must have been the end of 2013 I was talking to them. I think I moved right after that at the beginning of 2014. And I took a job there as an editor in what they were calling the identity section. At the time Policy Mike's was this like it was a kind of cool idea actually, it was basically like blogging. It was a blogging platform for people who had different political beliefs and the idea was of young people? The idea was like, you know, people can have dialogue with each other and so on, but it wasn't sustainable. So, like I was part of the process of like, let's make this a media company and not a blogging platform. And this was sort of at the moment where everybody was pivoting to digital. So, Mike but it wasn't sustainable. So, like I was part of the process of like, let's make this a media company and not a blogging platform. And this was sort of at the moment where everybody was pivoting to digital. So Mike was successful and popular and I learned a lot about digital media. And I wrote a lot for them and for—they also let me write—every place I worked let me write elsewhere. So that was very cool. So that that's when I came to New York. It must have been 2014 that I came here, but I [inaudible].

Crews: There was a lot of technology transition [speaking over each other] [laughter]. Yeah, what happens next?

McBee: What happened next was, so it was 2014 and then my book came out—Am I right? Yeah, My book, came out in 2014. So, in that interim, I finished it, I got an agent and—But in the end I actually sold City Lights through the Michelle Tea's Imprint, which was [inaudible] imprint. And that book was called Get a Life that came out 2014. And actually, it was really like it wasn't it sold a lot that people really responded to it, which is great. Definitely more than I expected for a small book on a small press City Lights was very enthusiastic about it and they were amazing, really championed it. And the book itself was meant to be a kind of almost a, almost if there are all these sort of trans memoirs that I appreciated but I was finding very frustrating and not seeing my story in it, And I thought all of these like the ways that I call it the violence and othering that the way in which trans people have been positioned as metaphors or wedge issues or are symbolic in some sort of way, good or bad, I find troubling. And I really wanted to write a book that was about—That was a quote 'trans narrative' In that moment, but really was a response to the ways those stories were often told and the sort of very didactic way, just weird and didn't speak to me. So in the book—three quarters of the book is about basically preparation to transition. And my thought was like, we've all had giant transitions we've all—Many of us have experienced death or a divorce or a pregnancy or a, you know, move across the country or like huge identity shifts that really define who we are and how do we decide that we want to take those sorts of leaps, how do we know it's the right thing. So much of my experience of transitioning was, I don't know, it's not like I had this dysphoria and stuff but I wasn't like—I don't know, it all didn't feel super clear cut to me. And I felt like at some point I just had to make a choice that felt the most right. And then hope that it was true, and I really wanted to capture that because I felt very sure that I wasn't the only person and trans people aren't the only people who experienced that. And I thought it was a disservice to us to either, so either presuppose that everybody who's trans—now, that doesn't sound revolutionary, but at the time, I really wasn't hearing anyone else say this, but either presuppose everybody who is trans is having horrible dysphoria and that's the only reason to transition and everything is very medicalized. And I think that's part of how a lot of people, myself included. But I also wanted to sort of—I just want to get at the nuance of how you make this kind of big choice for yourself. And so that was a lot about that. It was about racking all kinds of ideas I had about men and my family and dealing with trauma and dealing with this trauma of this mugging I had happen to me in San Francisco that was really intense where the guy went on to shoot two other men before my transition, but let me go. And so that book came out at that time. And I think that in many ways kind of defines the next few years in my life because I didn't expect people to really care that much about it but it did, you know, that at least people's interest some good reviews and drew attention I think from a lot of people who became kind of writing contemporaries, for me, it was very cool. And also, by the time the book came out, that was 2014. I was only at night a little bit longer and then I moved over to Quartz, which was like another additional news outlet but the global business news site. And sort of the book came out—I think the book came out actually literally as soon as I arrived at Quartz, which also was when my mom died. So, everything kind of happened at the same time. And all that sort of opened up a whole new chapter of my life for better and obviously for worse in some ways, but for better, and that Quartz was like this amazing place to work and to spend five years, which I did and which I think Quartz was a very, is a very respected media organization that was started by Wall Street Journal reporters and editors who really wanted to find a different way to cover it more digitally, native way to cover businesses and there sort of

composition was like business news in general, like this is relevant to everyone. So it's working there and working with these really, you know, pedigreed journalists who were like, you know, supporters of me in a moment when also that was around the 'trans tipping point' quote unquote. So, I had already been doing work. I get Mike I remember when Chelsea Manning came out as trans in the middle of her, you know, trial related stuff around transition, like there's political stories about her. And then there's the fact that she transitioned, and I remember being in the mic newsroom and we faced that same problem everyone faced which was like, how do we address that this happened to keep telling other stories about her. What are we doing? Do we say anything or do we just do the one story about her transition and you know, that she's come out and then we move on and so we did the right thing. I think we just said, like we did the story that Chelsea Manning was trans which just came out, and then we did the other reporting the same day, if something like Chelsea Manning in paragraph, you know, formerly Bradley Manning and that was it. And I remember like that was a huge moment because a few other places did that. And in places like NPR, as I remember, really didn't and it got a lot of blowback and to me, that was a big moment in media because I felt like I really had to explain over and over again some of the stuff. And I was lucky that Mike got it and they were supportive of being on the edge of that, so when I went to Quartz, I brought that same kind of like, I guess, media. It's like, I haven't really wanted to be like this person necessarily, always, but I feel like I'm the person in the room who is always like, OK, you got to think about this differently and make sure that we're aware of this and Quartz was incredibly supportive, I really didn't experience any blowback at all from them ever, or pushed back around being thoughtful about coverage and stories. And I'm lucky because that was the period I think really there was a lot of confusion in media kind of about like, they knew people believed in change, but they weren't totally sure how to do it within the kind of constraints of the profession. And there was a lot of confusion and concern about how to do that well and so I was, of course, like I got to be, I was an editor and I was part of, like making sure that happened. And I was also randomly or not randomly, but like I found myself ending up doing a lot of like and I ended up the head of growth at Quartz, which was like a kind of to me sort of random thing, but I guess not so random because I had this whole experience from Mike, understanding how Facebook works and I learned all that and so I brought it to Quartz and I also was always from the modern love story, thinking about audience and how do you get people to care about letter writing and sort of bridge across to people who don't know they care about what you're saying? I feel like that's the story of my life. So, like that was what I did at Quartz too, I was an editor and I was also the head of growth. And our growth strategy was really headlines as poetry it's like how do you create a headline that really is intellectually honest that truly tells the story about what the stories about, and that takes are different stories like obsessions and condenses them into something that can be intriguing enough that people will want to, you know, be interested enough to click on it. So, I was part of thinking about how do you reach audiences in the digital age? I was a big part of that, of course, in Quartz was an industry leader in that, so that was sort of a strange period in my life because the book had come out and I was doing this kind of very businessy, though, related to my other interests, like piece of editorial work. And then I was also doing a lot of freelancing and my mom died and so I was dealing with loss and that went on for a couple of years. And then I knew I wanted to write about masculinity, so the book kind of came out of the fallout I was experiencing around socialized—all

of these ways, socialized masculinity was kind of catching up to me I guess. As I was navigating all of that at the same time. I know, it's a lot of different strains. Okay.

Crews: Where in the city were you living at the time?

McBee: Well, when I first moved I lived in—I kind of lived in Flatbush area, but not for very long, for a few months, and then I moved to the lower east side, then I lived there for three years. So most of that time I was on the lower east side and then eventually moved to Williamsburg but not until at the end of my tenure at Quartz.

Crews: Yeah, I guess I am curious a little bit about—when you lost your mom just —what that time was like, what your time outside of work was like at that time. What your support system was like?

McBee: Well, I mean, it was really hard because, you know, I had been in a long relationship that ended and moved to New York and work was kind of like what I had going for me and I was new to the city and it's incredibly challenging here, you know. Everything went wrong like I moved into my first apartment and I obviously had roaches and, you know, it's a nightmare place and I had to break the lease and leave. I didn't really know anybody, and it's just like every bad thing that happens to people in New York I definitely experienced. And then I met my wife, which was great, and the big bright spot in all that. That was in March of 2015, so before my mom died, but not by very much. I met her in March. And I've been sort of dating people casually and that was a nightmare, too [laughter]. Just everything was kind of a nightmare, you know, I was like dating casually, and my wife, Jess, she—a friend had been trying to set us up, actually. We were both kind of like, yeah maybe, I don't know. We didn't know each other. Like this. This woman was really convinced that we would really hit it off and we both were like, OK, you know, it's like weird when somebody feels that way. We didn't know. And so, then we actually kind of met—We met at a party and not knowing that the other person would be there. But we knew who each other was from the Internet or whatever. Well we really hit it off but we both felt not quite ready to be in a relationship. So, we both decided to like, just sort of be friends, I guess, for initially. I was taking a break from dating at all and so we had a few months of being friends and then by July, I think we'd, we should go on dates like we obviously like each other. So, we started dating in July. And then my mom died in September. So, Jess and I, when we started dating, it was like it just seems like a really intense situation because it felt like I had to make a lot of decisions. My mom died from a short illness. So, it was like, yeah, we started dating in May, So, my mom got sick in July. So, it's like we had only a few months and then I really, I don't know, I felt pretty convinced that I would end up marrying her. I'm a Pisces, I sometimes just know. I really felt psychic [inaudible] I don't know, it's not the right time. But I just had this feeling and I really was worried that—I didn't know that my mom was going to die, but I was worried she would, So, we went down and met her. Jess met her before she died in August, which is intense, obviously. And so, I don't know. My life was with a lot of that, just like a lot of dealing with my mom, being sick, trying to take care of her. [to someone entering room] Hi, no worries. Being in a new job, at Quartz, and trying to make sure that, you know, I don't know, I was doing all the job and yeah. And then Jess met her. She died a couple of weeks after that so then my life was about that. So, I don't know.

It's sort of like I had like I had some friends or add a few people I met through Mike. And then I also had, like, similar kind of people I knew from online who were like queer community folks here that like I was spending time with. And, you know, [inaudible] the queer community, in any city is kind of connected to the greater community in every other city I found. It's like I had—I sort of—loose connection—friends from San Francisco who were sort of part of that world who then moved here. So I had people and I, you know, I went to every speech and I did all the queer New York things, but I didn't feel like I—I think the combination of like transitioning in the first few years and all my questions I had about being a man and socialized masculinity and a way that that kind of disrupted my relationship with the queer community, which also happened because I was living in Boston where I didn't really have a big queer community and then coming to New York where I didn't really know a lot of people, and then my mom dying and then dating being weird because I wasn't sure how to date as a queer person at that time. It was really truly the beginning of online dating in a big way and I didn't understand how to navigate that. I'd been in a relationship for nine years. So, I didn't know how to do any of that stuff. So, I felt like when I think about the time, it's just like total chaos. Everything fell apart. I didn't know how to do anything I felt like I supposed to be doing. And my book came out and professionally, my life was going really well. But outside of my professional life, I just —I felt like a baby who didn't know how to navigate anything. And I think everyone who moves to New York feels like that when they move to New York. It's like everything you think that you know is not here. It just isn't. You have to really learn, not just have a job or how to, whatever, but how to navigate the city. So, I wasn't prepared for that at all. And then, of course, I was still figuring out how to operate as a man in the world, and how I wanted to do that in a way that felt honest and authentic and trying to figure out how to in relation to other people and then navigating this horrible situation with my mom and her dying. It was very unexpected. So, yeah, it's just like a, it just felt like a bomb went off in my life. And that was my first couple of years in New York, which in a way was great because I feel like that's—not great, but it was very like on theme for New Yorkers truly couldn't have done much worse.

Crews: When did that start to shift or...

McBee: Yeah, I think when I, well definitely when Jess and I started dating. Obviously, I felt like there was something, you know, I hadn't dated anyone that I really liked, you know, in a really long time. So that was really special and that felt like there was a future for me in that realm, which was important to me. And I think when I moved into the apartment on the lower East Side, which I really loved. It was a very small studio apartment, but I'd been living in such a bad situation. I mean, literally, there was—I remember—I decided to move out, the day I decided to move out of the old place was when I found a baby roach in the refrigerator. And I was like, this refrigerator is sealed. Do you know what I mean? It's a refrigerator and it's a baby. Like what? Where did it even come from? I mean, it was so beyond—I have to leave. I'm going to lose my mind. Like, this is beyond anything. So that was so bad. And then this apartment was like, I don't know, I mean, it's on the lower east side, it was a tenement building. It was beyond what I probably, what I could truly afford at the time. But it was magical, and I could do it and it just felt like, I don't know. There's like—it felt like a new beginning and maybe like a restart kind of thing. And that was in the few months before my mom died. So, there was sort of a beginning feeling

there, like, OK, like I can do this. And then my mom gets sick. And then that was obviously awful, but the one positive part of it was my brother, sister and I were close and so we had to really work together, and we did work together to manage my mom's health, you know, just the three of us, so we really had to have to figure that out together. I think that even though that was terrible, it was nice to be kind of—it kind of brought me back closer to my family again. In a way, that was when things started to change, I guess. But then my mom died. So awful. And it was so awful. And then things got really dark. But actually, it was sort of like darkest before the dawn things, because I think I had to hit a kind of bottom with that because it connected back to my gender stuff. I really was like walking around so mad. In a grief kind of rage. But also that was when I was really, I've been reporting on this masculinity stuff, I was aware of masculinity crisis, but I also was aware that people were moving away at that point from that conversation, it was like the recession was in the rearview. More and more people were just talking about all these things like the trans tipping point and it just felt like people were moving on. At least in New York and in the cities, you know, it is like I didn't feel like I was moving on and I didn't think that things that had come up during that conversation of masculinity crisis ever got resolved. There were still men playing video games and living at home. All that stuff, it was just like, oh, well, you know, it felt like, wait, what's going on here and why am I relating to this? This is just about this moment in the global recession and I, you know, I'm in the void and I'm in New York City and having like a relatively OK time of it in this way financially right now, why do I relate to all this masculinity crisis stuff like that, like the ways in which we've socialized masculinity. So being in grief, I think actually to me was the tipping point for me around, like what became I guess my next book, but also just changing my perspective on all of that. I felt really stuck and trapped and I got through this whole transition and then come out the other side and I was like, this is it, I don't know. I just the expectations and the and the privileges of masculinity, white masculinity were really disturbing to me. And I think with my mom's death, I really, I felt really isolated and it was an isolation, sort of my own making, but also not really. I was in that box. I felt I couldn't express my feelings or my friends, obviously cared, but I think they weren't quite sure how to sort of affirm my identity gender wise, but also reach out to me in the ways that, you know, they maybe would have in the past or be available or kind of maybe I was less like reaching out to them. I don't know that something was getting mixed up with, like socialized gender identity and my attempts to, I guess sort of—Even though I was trying to resist all of that stuff, I also obviously wanted to feel real and valid and I didn't know another way to do it. So, I was just pretty confused and also increasingly angry because I was so mad anyway, because that's part of grief. But I was also just like this is the only emotion people seem to accept from me. So that was awful, but then that summer of 2015, sort of three months after she died, when I was sort of at the height of that feeling and it was just very dark. That was when I sort of gave these street skirmishes with men. And it is bizarre. It was like three months ago every month, a guy tried to start a fight with me, in the street, which is not normal. And my part of it is that I think I was giving off a bad vibe. Like a mad, bad vibe. So I think other guys who in retrospect, in 2013, it was always white guys. It's always white guys about my age who had some markers of maybe not being the best place, like servicing the downtrodden maybe in certain ways, like [inaudible]. Just people who seem like they're having a rough time, but like, we're okay, but something was going on. I didn't have a language for it, I just knew this certain kind of guy keeps wanting to start shit with me. And so the third time that happens is like, you know, it was a guy going the wrong way on a one way

street with their bike and then almost hitting me in the pedestrian. I was right, I'm trying to cross the street. You're going the wrong way. But now you're mad at me and I feel like obviously now I would have a totally different reaction, but I was just frustrated. I would get into these little moments with these dudes and then the last time it happened, like this guy and I had this really protracted argument that he started. He thought I was taking a picture of his car, the pretense doesn't even make any sense [laughter]. Anyway, he's right outside my apartment. I think that was part of it, he was outside my apartment. Just trying to get ice cream for Jess and I from the bodega across the street and I—it is really like I was actually having a good day and I just wanted to be inside with her eating ice cream, and instead I was on the street having this stupid argument, with this guy for no reason about this car. And it really escalated. They kind of got to that point where people were clearing out and giving us space to fight, which I was also very conscious of. I'm like, wow, it's so wild that someone's coming up to me and trying to engage me in this way that's clearly violent and nobody gives a shit. I know that's New York, but I also knew it was gendered, you know. There's something about that that bothered me. And anyway, it got very heated and then in the end, it's sort of—I think I kind of just screamed in a way that he was like, wow, you seem nuts, so then he kind of, not to be ablest, but he thought there was something wrong with me. Which I wanted him to think because I wanted him to go away. But after that, I was like, you know, why did I fight, you know. And so that was a turning point, because I never even questioned these sorts of fundamentals of masculinity I kept being told, which was the way things were. And that question led to me pitching a story to Quartz about learning how to fight in order to understand that answer, that question, which I did write and that—and I also want to think about like [inaudible]. This was a moment where boxing was becoming very cool, this was 2015. I was like, why do people risk their bodies, why do men risk their body's specifically when they don't need to and what are the economics of that? So, in a way of reaching that masculinity crisis story. And yes, that I asked that question a bit and that basically started the whole thing for me when I realized I could question masculinity. But there's a bunch of questions I had about masculinity and I talked to all kinds of people for it. And it changed the way I saw my own transition. In a way, I realize that so much of what I was struggling with was really a universal problem. Literally universal, or at least literally universal in North America. And every cis guy I talk to, academic and not around like these topics, like we're, you know, affirming that this was like a social structure and social problems. So, it wasn't just me having this inability to understand something through my own transition which was a very shame based perspective that I internalized, which is sort of the whole point of like, you know, policing masculinity. I took that in. And then this was a way out. So, after that, that's what all my work came from. That I think was really the turning point was that was like realizing I could ask those questions, have a journalistic perspective, learning how to box, which I'm sure you're going to ask me about, but that whole period was the turning point for me, it felt like I had to invent, literally a container to have a rite of passage for myself without—about what was going on, but also to like resocialize myself because the way that I was being socialized just wasn't working for me.

Crews: I was thinking about a question that I had written down, kind of about navigating spaces that were traditionally not queer and I was thinking of like the [inaudible] as an example. But I'm kind of thinking from what you're saying and from like this kind of search for community and

contact and like some level of vulnerability, even if this kind of unexpected space. Maybe, I don't know, maybe that question that I was thinking of, is kind of the wrong question and it's more like what was allowed to happen or able to happen in that space, imagine like that wasn't accessible to you outside of that.

McBee: Yeah, a lot. I mean, that was sort of a surprise for me. I mean, I guess the way you're saying makes sense. It's like how [inaudible] so isolated and I always had community, so I just found the nearest one that that worked for me and I kind of like opened myself up to it in a way. But I didn't know at the time that's what I was doing. I really thought I was. I mean, first of all, I—to write this story, which then became my book *Amateur*, I went to the gym—I had five months to train, and the point is, I was training for this charity fight and I was going to be in the Madison Square Garden. I didn't really think about any of that. I didn't think about how that wasn't enough time. It truly wasn't that you're supposed to train—everyone around me trained at least a year, but most of them a year and a half, two years, three years. This was like not enough time. I didn't think about how it was like a historic thing, for old town, how I don't really think about how I was probably the first trans man to walk in the Madison Square Garden, which I was, but I didn't think any of that. I just was, like, desperate for these answers and felt like in a dark place. It was like, I don't know, this felt like I think I needed to do. And I also made the decision to not be out as trans, to tell the story, because I felt concerned that that would be a mediating factor. You know how people treated me and I really wanted to make sure that my experience of this was as, you know, as unmediated as possible, I guess in terms of traditional masculinity and the questions that I knew might come up. I really kind of expected something totally different than what it actually ended up being for me, which was a profoundly positive experience, truly, I mean, all the way through, it really was. And the biggest positive piece for me was that it was so semantic, it was so physical. I had never—I don't think I'd ever been really, a truly in body person. I mean, I'm trans, so I think I never felt super connected to my body. And I'm a trauma survivor. And those two things, you know, even after my transition, I felt way better about myself aesthetically and I felt more comfortable. But then I felt really disconnected from my body in public. So I felt like all of those sort of ways I was being treated [inaudible] back to me then responding to those treatments, it just like, I felt like farther and farther from myself in this other way socially. And the gym was just like purely physical space with a very spiritual dimension. Boxing is a very spiritual sport. I didn't know that, you know, I mean, I am a fan, but I didn't really understand that, like without teammates, without anybody to kind of cover the things that you're weak at, you just have all your weaknesses exposed. And so therefore, everyone can see them, and especially when you're training with people. And so the guys I was around were Wall Street guys and my coach and all these amateur, you know, either people who were like ex-boxers, who were coaches and, you know, a very interesting mix of class and race stuff happening. But everybody was a boxer first, kind of like with what Boston Roads that are first, and that, like the way that people treat you with respect as if you had a fighter knot. They even had this charity fight, you know, it was just like, are you willing to put yourself out there that you're one of us and you don't really care who you are or what your experience is. It was really profound actually, the people didn't even care if you were that good, you know, I mean, I certainly wasn't that good, but it didn't really matter. Like they cared if you had heart and that was—it's all a very cliché, but it is true, you know and so I, found a lot of intimacy with men, with cis men, in a way I never had

before. And that intimacy came from being in the sort of shared experience. And I don't really know how to explain this. I mean, I wrote a book about it, so obviously it's explained there and that's a good thing to do it. But I think that what was really special about that community was that I found that there was a way to have a depth of connection that was different than I'd experienced in the past, but certainly not any less condensed or any less deep or any less profound. And I think the sad part of that was what sociologists later told me, I'll cover of violence, covered of violence. It allows men who might not otherwise to drop guards around, you know, performing masculinity and feel like they can actually be open to being intimate physically. I mean, it was very—literally I've never been out more in my life than I was at this boxing gym, which was just this kind of constant touching and physicalizing affection because there's like a lack of fear, not a perceived as quote unquote, bad. [inaudible] doing a realist thing, all this because it's possible. It was always a little bittersweet because of that, but then I, you know, once these guys knew I was trans, once I came out, once all of that it didn't change anything. They showed up at my book watch, they are still part of my life, you know, it wasn't actually dependent on my ability to sort of be one of them in the way that, you know, but I thought maybe it was. So that was also really an interesting process. I think I had—I think I really felt pretty bad about what it felt like what the human condition was at that point, and this was like a real reductive and surprising experience, which is really cool. Although the book is also all about all of the terrible things I was learning and what I believe to be true and all my internalized biases about gender and unholding those things too, so it's not like I just had a great time, but it was definitely like I found a different type of community there. It wasn't that different really, because people are people, but in a different way of relating.

Crews: And you were with Jess that whole time? When did you get married?

McBee: We got married, well, you know, we had a City Hall line up thing in 2017, but we got married in January, sorry, February of 2018. [inaudible] Guatemala. we've been spending a lot of time. So if she does like—her career has been largely internationally human rights stuff, so that was important to her she wanted to be someplace, not this country, ideally, and kind of her career has been largely international human rights stuff. So that was important to her. She wanted to be someplace, not in this country ideally and kind of create an environment where our families could be abroad with us and build community. A place that, you know, with Guatemala specifically, it has a lot of women's rights, [inaudible] and woman's rights groups and stuff. It was important for her to find a place to connect to and give financially to that sort of thing. So that's why we ended up in Guatemala.

Crews: Where do your brother and sister live?

McBee: My sister's in Boston. So continued that relationship blossomed we still go out all the time. And my brother is in Oakland, So also in the bay area. I could continue to [inaudible] so interestingly.

Crews: How do you think about the future?

McBee: In general?

Crews: In general.

McBee: Well, the last part of my story maybe informs that which was like after I wrote *Amateur* and that came out in 2018, you know, before I came out, but in 2018, I got a call from Lauren Morelli, who I was friends with. She was my—she wrote an essay for me, at Mike, about coming out on the set of *Orange Is the New Black*. And we are both in Pittsburgh and we actually go way back, which is sort of like a random thing. so we, She got into television writing a few years ago and she was married to a guy I went to college with, So we were sort of in each other's lives and I always talk all these people up at Emerson, who had—she wasn't from Emerson, but she was part of that circle, if there was ever a TV writing opportunity that they thought of me for, they would give me a call. And like, who says that, and hasn't even called, but she called me because of a perfect thing. It was like *Tales of the City*, it was being adapted, and I love *Tales of the City*, I love those books. I read them in high school my mom and I read them together and I read them again in San Francisco. So, the literary adaptation—So she called me and asked if I wanted to join for that. And so I did in 2018, literally the month before I got married I moved to LA for a few months. And I did meet my wife in Guatemala for our wedding, I know what that sounds like [laughter]. And worked on *Tales of the City* and then the book came out and then I had done another writing and then I went back to L.A. this year to work on the new *L-word* reboot. it had been like, you know, it's been really interesting and cool to keep expanding formats and now I'm working in film and TV which also goes back to like my early days the interest that evolved. I think, I don't know, what do I think about the future? It's been—I've been thinking a lot about the stories we tell. That's like I've always been my interest is like we can keep creating nuance and points of connection in the stories we tell about who we are. I still think that's the most potent way to keep expanding, you know, our own sense of humanity and also expanding who gets contained. Everyone should be in the circle of humanity and until everyone is like even people that we don't like. I think that we are failing to do our jobs as human beings. I think I'm glad I found personally, I found a place where that is possible, which is these different narrative formats. And I feel excited about watching that being in this first sub wave now in television. And, you know, and foreign digital media, and before that, regular media, I just have seen that happen in our lifetimes, in my lifetime, in a really powerful way. Even though there's still so much to be done in so many ways that that's not that successful or failed, the actual people that aren't commercializing and really need support and resources. I don't think it's sort of like cure all for everything, but I do think that there's—a lot has changed, you know, in a tangible way. And I think that for me what I can do is what I'm doing, and I feel happy to be part of that. And I feel really good about our futures collectively. In like a, you know, environmental way for sure, I feel scared and I also think that reality of being, you know, what literally the medical community calls a pioneer is not it's not great, it's not awesome to be—in some ways, it's super interesting and cool and I'm like, wow. What an interesting vantage point to be living this life that I am on earth. But the reality of being on the cutting edge medical field and not having—I don't know how long I'm going to live. I don't know what you're saying could happen to me that no doctor knows of yet because there aren't any studies to confirm it. I don't know what to happen, obviously, politically, you know, for my well being, I don't know what that will mean for me and I also don't

know what it will be for the people coming up behind me. And I just feel like this whole time I've been out as a trans person we've been at a crossroads. I don't think we've really picked this—it sort of feels like we've almost instead of culturally picked a direction or not, we just slipped. And I don't know what that means, I don't know what's going to happen. So, in some ways, I think—I had a guy I knew vaguely who died recently, a trans guy, who died recently. And like, I think by suicide I'm not sure, it wasn't in the public. But he had been dating the same woman who dated this other guy who lost his girlfriend, who was trans to suicide recently. I just have been thinking a lot about that epidemic in this community. And why, I guess the—it's just profoundly sad to me that there are still so many trans people, even in New York, even in the most theoretically, you know, accepting environment with the most amount of resources that people don't feel like they can survive. So obviously, there's a big disconnect. And trans people are being murdered all the time and all that. I don't know if you mean the future for everyone and not, but when I think about the future for trans people, I'm not, I'm not, I don't know. We can't by ourselves change everything. You know, we really need other people and that's why I stay in certain areas. But I'm also like, really fucking bummed that we're still kind of in the same position we were in eight years ago when I was first thinking about all this when it comes to that kind of thing. When it comes to people wanting to stay alive or feeling something to root for and that there's still so many people and that's not true. I'm really worried about that. I'm really grateful for that because I think it's not for lack of effort from all the trans people who are trying to make the world better. It's for lack of effort from the people who are willfully not wanting to connect with their own humanity and understand where we have these collective points of connection. This decision to not do that, it's just such a sad thing to me. And I think that, I don't know, I'm in a period of my life where I'm like, will that change or will people transcend that, or will this just be, will we have to figure something else out? Or will they transcend it When I'm like 70 or, if I live that long, or after I die. Will this be something that maybe changes not in my lifetime. Maybe it's just because I'm getting a little older but that really bums me out. And I feel a lot of fear for people. Though, I also do feel a lot of excitement, too. So I felt pretty—maybe I'm like everyone, I just don't—I think that we're really at a crossroads and really need to change as a culture and I'm personally doing my best and I know a lot of other people who are, but it's not enough without the extra shit, you know. So, I think it's a slow TBD, you know, like what's going to really happen here. But I'm hoping for the best.

Crews: Well, I want to be sensitive to your time, and now we have a bit of a timeline. Maybe going from there, we'll just end on another note of where does love exist in your life right now?

McBee: Yeah. Well, a lot of places, I think things really did turn around for me after I kind of renegotiated my own relationship to masculinity and gender, like with real experience of boxing. Because I kind of learned to take up space, again, in a more honest way. I learned how to be a feminist again in a way that works for me in this body, which I wasn't totally... I was always a feminist, but I wasn't sure how to sort of be that. I had to relearn that. By which I mean, the things that worked for me before [inaudible] for me. They really started, for example, wasn't [inaudible] [laughter]. How to listen and be quiet and do all these things that like literally the opposite of what I was trying to do for a long time. It was just a huge, huge change. And in that, I have re-calibrated and we come out the other side and found all kinds of community again. I

think the biggest place that's been true is I kind of like the world is my home. I've lived a lot of places I really write—I write in an internal space but I also really write to be read to communicate to people and I love hearing from people and being in conversation. And I've been really lucky the last few years. I guess in terms of finding love on a—as a person in the world, I spend my time literally going from things like this to other things like this, communicating and talking to people who are interesting and interested in things that I care about, too. And so in that sense, in a public place of sense, I have really found a way to keep my dignity and to have a lot of integrity and move through the world in a way that I'm comfortable with and that feels right to me gender wise and otherwise and also to find good people. And you create a community of like-minded people and to try to keep expanding that out into people who don't even know that they want to be like minded but [laughter] but if they gave me five minutes, I promise I can make them that way. And so that's been really cool, and I also have my wife, I have my immediate family, my siblings, my many nephews, I have five nephews [laughter]. At least currently, I mean, who knows what will end up eventually, but it's interesting because they're all assigned male at birth, only assigned male at birth kids in my life, which has been a very interesting thing for me to think about, being like I'm an older male in the lives of all these younger guys, these younger kids. So I'm, you know, a potential role model and I find a lot of value in that, in caring for other people in my family and otherwise and, you know, obviously all my friends, my broader queer community, which I was able to, a lot actually through the work I've been doing the last few years. We connect to queer community kind of from a different perspective, but without losing all of the years I spent in community for this, but kind of understanding myself and being able to communicate, I am part of this community and I was part in this one way and that way was genuine. And now I'm part of it in a new way and how can that work. And so, re-finding that out has been, first was really hard and now feels like a, I don't know, it's cool to get to look twice in that way. And I think this might sound trying, but there's a lot of value for me in my online life, like I think I am lucky that people talk to me online and the things they say are really moving. Like I have obviously dealt with a lot of trolls, that sort of thing, too, but I don't know that whatever. I don't really care about that. I'm really impressed with the infinite you know, DM's I get or emails contacted through my website or whatever. Or just lots of people who want to say nice things to me and makes me feel like what I'm doing here, and I care about —I have an effect and that's cool. And I've also been able to meet some other really amazing people through those same mediums and formats and though the events I've been doing and all that. So, I was like, I am finding love in all kinds of places often surprising, places like the boxing ring [laughter]. But it's because I did have to kind of recalibrate and learn again how to look for it, you know, and to, I guess reckon with places where it wasn't. But it really did. Once that was possible, I agree that I think it really opened me up to all these [inaudible] and all these new ways. People are incredibly resilient and adaptive and wish so many there's just so much surprising things about a person. So that's really cool. That was a thesis I had and it turned out my thesis was that there was possibility beyond, you know, like even I understood in terms of what was about connecting to people or around being a person in the world and then I could bring my whole past with me and still somehow find a way to live this life and to have genuine connection with people. And I actually for a few years wasn't sure that was actually true. And now I feel like it is so that was really great.

Crews: Well thank you so much.

McBee: Of course, yes, I hope it's hopeful.

Crews: Yeah. I feel the hope.

McBee: Oh, good [laughter].