

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

NATHAN LEVITT

Interviewer: Meryl Jones-Williams

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Location of Interview: Conducted over Zoom; Jones-Williams in Brooklyn apartment, Levitt in Stanford home

Transcribed by WhisperUI (AI tool) and Ia Rycerz (volunteer)

NYC TOHP Interview #216

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Meryl Jones-Williams: Hello, my name is Meryl Jones-Williams, and I will be having a conversation with Nathan Levitt 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 Monday, November 27th in the year 2023, and this is being recorded on Zoom. I'm in my apartment in Brooklyn, New York, and Nathan, you are in Stanford, Connecticut?

Nathan Levitt: Correct.

Jones-Williams: You're in Stanford, Connecticut. Okay, nice. Okay. So I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about just where you grew up and where you were born and anything you'd like to share about that?

Levitt: So I was born in Long Island, New York, but my family and I only lived there for about two years, and, well, I only lived there for about two years, and then we moved to South Florida. So I actually grew up in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, which, um, right now is not exactly the best trans state, trans-positive state to live in, but that's where I grew up. So I lived there for, you know, about 18 years. I went to high school - I went to all my elementary school, middle school, and high school there, and yeah, that was my growing-up area. I've moved a lot since then, I've been to a lot of different cities since then, but that's where I've had like my kind of adolescent, childhood, high school experience.

Jones-Williams: Wow. And you left Florida when you were how old?

Levitt: So I left Florida for col—for undergraduate college. I went to Emory in Atlanta, Georgia, and that's where I did, I did a program in women's studies and psychology. I feel like women's studies at that time, and maybe still now today, which is, like, where all the queer people ended up [laughter] like, at the whole school, it's like every queer and trans, even if not - I wasn't out, I wasn't aware of being trans at that time. That came a little later, but that sort of, um, kind of helped open me up to seeing a lot of queer and trans people. There was like a, a queer literature class at Emory that every queer identified person took, and it became less like I can't tell you a single thing we read in that class. It just became a way to connect with each other, you know, form a lot of different relationships, intimate and friendship relationships, and also the Indigo Girls were in Atlanta and went to Emory, so that was like part of my, because at that time I identified as a lesbian, so I was like really drawn to the school that the Indigo Girls were a part of. [Laughing quietly] That may have been the only reason I went there. I don't think I knew anything about like the academics. All I knew was: the Indigo Girls were in Atlanta, and they were connected to this college, and so that's what drew me there, and I did end up getting to

see them a lot, which was exciting. So I did four years in Atlanta, and then, when I graduated, which is - I'm 45 now, so I graduated high school in 1996, and I graduated college in 2000. Then I went to the Bay Area. I lived in Oakland and Berkeley because I really wanted to live, I think I just wanted to get as far away from like Florida as possible, so I went to the opposite side of the coast and of the country, and then I did a lot of different organizing there, which I'm, you know, happy to talk more about, but a lot of like, queer youth organizing, social justice, anti-racist organizing, and that's where I came out as trans, was being in the Bay, just being around a lot of other trans people, meeting the first trans people. I think that there were a lot of trans people in Atlanta, but I just didn't know, or we all didn't know at the time. We didn't necessarily have words for it, so that's like, you know, college time was 1996 to 2000, so we didn't see a lot of trans representation at that time. Not to say it wasn't there, but we didn't see a lot of it, especially in the South. And so the Bay Area, it was the Bay Area or New York City, which, I ended up in New York City, but I just felt like those were the places to be around, you know, queer and trans people, so. Then I went to the Bay, and then I went to Boston. It was like two years in the Bay, then I went to Boston to do a Master's in gender and cultural studies, because I thought that I was going to be a professor in gender and cultural studies, because that was like the queer and trans world, um. And then I went, and I did not like Boston so much, it felt like a tough place to live in, and then I went to New York City. So in 2005, I went to New York City, and I feel like that's when I got really involved in healthcare organizing, and I ended up going to nursing school, and I could talk more about that, but that's like where I ended up for the bulk of my life. Like last 20 years, I was in New York City, only recently in Stanford, Connecticut, but New York City is kind of where everything sort of happened for me, like getting connected to trans health, being a part of Callen-Lorde (Community Health Center), which is an LGBT health center in New York City, and really getting involved in healthcare specifically. Like before that was kind of organizing social justice work, and then it was like, hey, all of us experience all these barriers to healthcare - what if I kind of got into the system of nursing and healthcare and the medical world and helped to, you know, break down some of those barriers for people? So that's sort of my summary of all the places I moved around in, but there's lots more within those places.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, that makes sense. I mean, I would love to hear maybe a little bit more about your early community organizing? Like I feel like you're someone that strikes me that you've gotten so far, and it also, everything you've already described, like I can see the trajectory, but I wonder if the earliest community organizing, if you find that there are pieces of that in where you are now, or if it radicalized you in some way to where you are now.

Levitt: [Simultaneously] Mm-hm. [Pause] Yeah. So I think, you know, the first organizing I started doing was leaving Florida. Florida just felt like a tough place to do anything, and, and I

was in like, you know, middle school and high school there. It just felt like a politically diff—it's way worse now, but politically difficult place to be in, to come out or to really have any kind of radical politics, un. I think in Atlanta, you know, being in college at Emory politicized me a lot, like [clearing throat] being a part of different queer circles, there was a LGBT group on campus. At that time I was, I didn't identify as part of the community, but clearly something was there, but I was like, oh, let me go to these meetings as an ally. [Laughing] I kept saying “as an all—” I would start every sentence with, like, “as an ally,” and several people there just knew. They were sort of like, he's going to figure it out at some point. So, um, you know, around that time is when I, I came out as a lesbian first - I like to say I've been all the letters, look, I've been a heterosexual woman, straight woman! I've been a lesbian. I've been bisexual, I've been trans, and queer, so covering all the letters. But at Emory is when I got more politicized around organizing, and specifically with like, a part of the, the Women's Center, which nowadays I think back in the language is really exclusionary to trans people, but it wasn't something I really understood at the time, so, I got very involved in feminism and the Women's Center and working with queer youth at the time, like helping to organize, um, different queer youth projects and connecting with anti-racist feminist organizing. So that's when I kind of really got a part of like more white anti-racist organizing and solidarity with BIPOC people and people of color and through feminism, which is interesting because then later I was like, mm, the feminism I was involved in was like not very inclusive of trans people. But at the time it wasn't something I fully understood, and I felt like that was the place that you do organizing, so. I think through anti-racist organizing and through feminism is kind of how I got into where I was politically and kind of na—understanding these different systems of oppression. I feel like I placed it to that time where I was like, oh, as I started to come out as a lesbian, or I think at first I said I was bisexual, which fit at the time and then kind of morphed into being a lesbian. And I realized as I kind of stepped outside that [pause] kind of, group of being straight and heterosexual, even though that didn't totally fit for me, I started to understand these different forms of oppression, like how does, you know, does sexism work? How does racism work? And all these different things. And luckily I was a part of some great organizing groups there. And when I got out to the Bay Area, I kind of plugged into a lot more organizing. I worked for a place called, um, Lyric, which is like an LGBTQ youth center. I worked for the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, which is working with gay-straight alliances in schools. And GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Educating Network), which is also like, it's like very professional gay things I did out there. And really working specifically to make safe places for sch—for, like, queer youth in school. And also organizing, there was an organization called, or a program called Challenging White Supremacy. I don't think it exists anymore out there, but I got plugged into that. And they, and I learned a lot about solidarity work and organizing work. And I'm also Jewish, so I learned a lot about Jewish organizing in particular, like right now it's—it's very pressing, but like, the solidarity work with Palestinians, and that kind of came out of— and so I think from an early,

early-ish age, I made these kinds of connections to different forms of oppressions and like thinking that it wasn't just about LGBTQ rights, like really connecting all of the different things. But when I first came out as trans, it was actually, ironically, a conference in Florida, of all places, that when I, [laughing] there was a conference in Florida that was a trans conference, and I went as an ally to learn more. And then there was, I had only, I had only known about trans women. I had never heard anything about trans men. And again, I identified as lesbian at that time. I went to this conference to "learn more" as an "ally," and I saw my first, the first trans man I've ever met before who was speaking. And I just started hysterical crying, like in the back of the auditorium that we were in, and I couldn't understand why? Like I just had this outpouring of emotion, and I—I couldn't even place it, like I couldn't think, I remember thinking, why am I crying? This feels embarrassing. There's a lot of people here I don't know. And then I sort of left, you know, left the room and sat with it for a while and realized, like, I had never seen a trans guy before. I had never heard of trans, I'd never, and at that point, there was also somebody who identified as genderqueer, which I think now maybe we'd use more of the term nonbinary, but we didn't know that term then? Probably some folks did, but I didn't. And so I had met, you know, the first trans guy I'd ever met, and someone who identified as nonbinary, genderqueer, and I was like, this is who I am. Like, I felt like, I started identifying as genderqueer at that time, and feeling more like my gender was queer, and that it sort of, you know, enveloped all different kinds of genders. I didn't feel like, um, a woman or a man, I felt like something else, and so it was the first time I had words for it. And that, you know, that helped me connect to other, like, you know, it's so funny, I don't know if people still use the word genderqueer, but it was really big for me at the time. So that's, like, 2000, 2001 or so. It felt like a really important identity, something that, that felt queer and radical, and also, like, really just fucking with gender, you know, which felt like that was who I was at the time. And I also remember at that time, I was like, I don't want any hormones, any surgery. I just feel like this is who I am. And it absolutely was, at that time. You know, later on in life, I started to kind of feel like, maybe I do want to start testosterone, and maybe I am interested in just surgery. But that particular time was a really important and powerful time that when I talked to other trans men or genderqueer folks, nonbinary people that are around my age, even if they didn't grow up in the same places or go to the same places, we have a similar, I feel like we have a similar connection to this, like, term of genderqueer at that time, and finding each other, you know, in a place where we didn't see each other represented, at all. And then just teaching each other things, like, we didn't know shit about trans health, like, nothing, you know? We all had had these really negative experiences in healthcare, where no one knew how to take care of us or, you know, and really hearing some, you know, very offensive things within healthcare, getting questions that were really inappropriate. And then just finding each other and being like, okay, I found this thing online. I'll never forget when I moved to Boston for that gender and cultural studies program. We all were like, interested in hormones, but, mm, there were so

many hoops you had to jump through. I mean, it was, remarkable. It was like, a multiple therapist, you'd have to see, depending on where you live, like, you'd have to sort of show in some way that you were, were living in the gender you wanted to live in for a certain period of time. And you had to have this narrative for the therapist, too. Like, we all would share our script. It's kind of funny, like, nobody knew this, but we would be like, okay, this therapist, you've got to say this script. But nobody was being their authentic selves with these providers, you know, we were all like, how do we get what we need? And so it was really hard to get testosterone at that time. I guess it's like 2002. So I'll never forget, there was an older trans guy who was like, hey, I found this testosterone spray. Who knows where he ordered it from? I have no idea. In fact, I think it was like, water in a spray bottle. It is funny to say as a nurse and nurse practitioner now, who [laughing] provides hormones to trans communities, that we were just so desperate for something outside of this medical establishment, right? So we just, like, sprayed ourselves with this weird testosterone spray that did nothing, because I'm sure there was nothing in it. Um, but I feel like it's a very telling time of when, like, we just shared things with each other. We didn't know what we were doing. But some of us would be like, oh, yeah, I really feel a change. Like, there was no change. It was probably water. That went a little off track for your question. But I think it just like, I'm thinking back to what connection with trans people and nonbinary folks looked like at that time, where we were just, we had very little understanding of our own health, but we knew more than any of the clinicians or therapists we were seeing. So we just sort of, you know, shared scripts with each other of what to say. And our group was really small because we knew trans women, but we had not met or heard of other trans men or nonbinary people before. So it felt like a new discovery, you know, that feels so different nowadays. But at that time, it would be like if you met one other like genderqueer or trans man, you're like, I need to get all your information and be your best friend, you know? [Both chuckle]

Jones-Williams: Yeah, totally. Well, if you don't see an example of yourself, you know, it's, yeah, there's, how do you feel? Do you feel that that's changed now, as far as like trans visibility, or, like, yeah, how do you feel now versus then?

Levitt: Yeah, I, it feels so different. And especially now, I mean, I was saying before, in this nursing PhD program. So we're talking a lot about trans research, or I'm talking a lot about trans research, [laughing] nobody else is doing that. But, I'm learning about research and I'm trying to bring in trans research, and I bring it up because there's so much more than there ever was. Like when I was younger, we just didn't have anything. We would just, it would just be our stories. I mean, kind of really similar to like, oral histories, right? We would just talk to each other. We didn't know anyone at that time who had been on testosterone for, uh, over 10 years. You know, we were kind of doing it ourselves. At this point, I've been on testosterone for

over 20 years and had chest surgery 20 years ago, but I didn't know anyone else who had, so we didn't know, like, what are the long-term effects of this? You know, what, how long are we going to survive for? Those sorts of things we really didn't know, and we didn't see ourselves represented. But now, you know, I'm, I've been a part of trans organizing and specifically trans healthcare for over 20 years, and I've seen how it's grown. And it's, there's some ways it's gone backwards too, like in all the sort of anti-trans bills that exist in this country. But there are other ways that at least people know like, this is, I have a right to get trans healthcare. You know, even if you're in a state that's awful and you're trying to organize around it, like there's at least that sort of, I think for most people, feeling like we have gotten this healthcare for this certain period of time, we have existed for this certain period of time, we see ourselves in media. You know, we see ourselves, even if it's negative representations, we see ourselves more. And so it has changed a ton, you know? And now I think about it when I go to these conferences, where it's not like find the one trans person in the room and become best friends, because there's so many of us now. It's sort of like we, you know, it's, in some ways, I think we've lost a little bit of that, depending on where you live. Certainly if you live in places where there's not a big trans community, then you're going to find each other and connect, but I do find in like the bigger cities, it's not as urgent or necessary to connect with people because you already have your, you know, circles and the organizing and the healthcare centers and the support groups. So I think things have grown, resources have grown. There's certainly been a backlash to it, but I think, you know, there's way more. I—I teach also, I teach at Yale School of Nursing, so I'm a part of this gender and sexuality health justice concentration where I get to teach nurse practitioners and midwives about many different things, but with a focus on trans health. And so it's amazing to have all these resources. And I've been told by my students that I give them too many, too much homework assignments, too many readings because I've never seen so many readings on trans health, so I'm like listing 15 things to read. And now I've just said, get to what you can get to, like whatever speaks to you, but just letting them know, like I didn't have this when I was in school. So I'm going to give you every single reading I can find. So in that way, it has changed a lot, just that there's more resources, there's more people in power positions too. Like we didn't see any trans folks in the media or like in legislation or in even like executive directors of organizations. So just seeing people, or as nurse practitioners or, you know, healthcare providers. I still get a lot of patients who say to me, trans patients who are like, wow, you're a nurse practitioner. I didn't think a trans person could do that. So I think there's changes, but then there's still, certainly depending on where you live and what kind of backlash you're experiencing, there's ways in which we have gone backwards a little bit.

Jones-Williams: Yeah. I mean, I, a lot of what you're saying resonates with me. I'm 37, so, I think like I also grew up like slightly younger than you, but there's so much that wasn't around me articulated, so. Like, I guess, one thing that I wanted to turn to in hearing you, and hearing

you speak is just that, um [pause] like the creativity of like being, kind of coming into a transness with people around you and not having, um words for how you identified. And that, that strikes me as needing to be rather creative, you know, like the testosterone spray, it's so cool, you know, in a way, you're like, even though we didn't have words for it, we're still doing, going about it in a way. And, I guess I wonder, even if we've come further and maybe it's like, there's some steps backwards to that, if you were given like full agency or you, and like your trans community within the healthcare system - without pushback, is there, are there things that you would do that you also can't do now?

Levitt: Mhm. Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, I've been thinking a lot about this, specifically around like trauma-informed care in healthcare. I could do a lot of, I do a lot of training about trans health, and I've also been a part of a few different, you know, organizations like Callen-Lorde. I started different trans health programs led by trans folks. Like a lot of the like buy-in for trans people, I find depending on where you work, sometimes that's not possible, right? Like you'll, you'll have trans people you work with, but the institution or the leadership is not, it doesn't represent, you know, the community, or it's like mostly white and doesn't represent, you know, BIPOC and people of color, or I've just been a part of a lot of organizations where I've been the only trans person or I'm trying to start a trans program, but the leadership doesn't sign on. So I think, you know, some of those barriers of having to go through all these different steps of having people sign on where you have to—I do a lot of like, convincing people that trans health is important. And it's very, I've been reflecting on this lately, it's really draining. I mean, I've been doing it for so long that I've gotten really used to it, but I spend most of my days convincing people that we should exist and receive healthcare, you know, which I also feel like because of the doing it for so long, I'd rather take that weight off of other people that maybe can't or that's too traumatizing for people. I'm like so unfortunately used to some really offensive questions or, you know, people that don't know what they're talking about, that I feel like I can also reach and connect with people in all different places in their understanding. Uh, so it would be nice to not [laughing] have those sort of barriers there where I'm like, okay, I see you have a very offensive question and I'm going to try to answer it in a way that makes you still feel comforted and comfortable and want to take care of our population. I help people start trans health clinics, I've been the director of trans health at Community Healthcare Network, which is in New York City and has a bunch of different clinics. And so I've helped people start these clinics, and what I find is that if trans folks are not involved, or there's not at least, like, trans people that are at an advisory council where their voice is a part of it and, you know, cisgender leadership that maybe aren't the best allies or don't have the most understanding or are doing it for, you know, profit, something because they can make money off of – they're not sustainable programs and they're not based in what we need as a community. So if we didn't have those barriers, you know, and we do have in the country, some clinics and organizations

that are, you know, by and for trans people, which I think are wonderful, and – um, but if we didn't have some of those barriers around funding or around what's considered important health, you know, I had to do organizing under HIV for so long and HIV health is of course so important, and a lot of trans people, you know, are navigating their HIV status, but it felt like it was the only way we could talk about trans issues, was under the funding umbrella of HIV. And, you know, the messaging that it was trans women in particular that were more at risk, and so all of that language was very challenging, I think, to our organizing into thinking about like, what do we need in healthcare? So right now people will, when I do these trainings or help start clinics, people will say, okay, so we have to do hormones and gender affirming surgery. And I worked in gender affirming surgery for a long time. And I say, well, yes, for some people, yes, that's what they need. But that's not all of who we are. You know, we have other health needs, we have—so I am—think more holistic health and trauma informed care and, and that sort of way of looking at health is what I would, what I'd do and what I'd want to be more involved in, to see us as whole people, to live our authentic selves. It's not just, you know, here's your hormones and surgery, which is quite important for people, but again, not all of who we are. And then also preparing people more. You know, I think that's part of trauma informed care, like preparing our communities for what it's like to access the healthcare system and the medical system and, and seeing other things as health, right? Like housing, you know, not just our, our medical appointments. So yeah, there's a lot of things I think I would do if I didn't have those kinds of barriers of organizations and funding and, and leadership. And having to like, constantly convince people that they should focus on our health, right? I've just been doing it for so long that I've only recently stopped to say, this is very draining. And I talk a lot about trauma. And I'm like, right, I think I've experienced, I don't think, I know I've experienced a lot of trauma of constantly having to teach doctors and nurses who are all cisgender and don't know anything about trans—and are quite transphobic, why they should take care of us, right? Because after a while, that's like, really, really draining. And so if I didn't have to do that, when I get to be a part of groups that are all trans, um, folks, or at least, like, great allies, then it feels like a weight is lifted off me and I can actually focus on our on our health needs, and our on our social and community needs.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. You're answering a lot of the questions that I've already had.

Levitt: Well, that's good, because I was like, am I going completely off track? But I guess no, you just talk and see how it goes.

Jones-Williams: [Simultaneously] No, no. I'm like, oh, you're already looking at the script [?]. [He laughs] I was going to ask you, you know, if you, if you felt like you had examples of yourself

around you, like while you're, um, maybe transforming the grief of like, being mistreated in a healthcare system, like how you, how do you transform that grief into the work that you're doing, and – yes, are there examples of you around you? And also like, if not, like, it sounds– you've already spoken to the challenges, but maybe, are there, things that you do for yourself, or like acts of self care that help you? Um. Yeah, like, how–how do you transform that grief into such positive action? Or are they connected?

Levitt: [Simultaneously] Yeah. [Pause] Right. Yeah. Yeah, I, it's funny, I teach within this gender and sexuality health justice program, I teach these nurse practitioner and midwifery students, a few different things, but–and I bring in community leaders, and they're, they're all like my friends and colleagues that I bring in as guest speakers. And I teach them one week of it, should be more than this, but one week of self care, like what does that look like, especially as nurses, because we all get burnt out, so I talked about how do you create a self care and sustainability plan, especially for us who are queer and trans nurses that are going to b– experience a lot of trauma in the medical establishment. So just recently, I was like, wow, I'm teaching this to the students, it means so much to them, they all come back to it years later and say thank you for this, but I'm not doing it for myself at all. And I think I actually realized this, or it sunk in a little bit more at this trans celebration weekend in Fire Island, which is where I connected with the trans oral history folks, because they did a presentation there. There was this, um, it was like, one of the events that was at the Belvedere, and it was like, really wonderful pl–in Fire Island, which is my special place. I think that is part of my self care is like, going to a beach place where people can just be naked, especially trans folks can just be completely free and naked on the beach, which is, I think, just the dream for me, that feels like self care and just like, all different kinds of bodies, and you're not feeling like, oh, someone's looking at me, and I'm nerv–just trying to understand why my body looks this way. And at that trans celebration weekend, which I had never bee– I think it was the first one that's ever happened, I thought, everything is about our joy. Like, it was just amazing to be, to not be in a space where it's always about our suffering and our trauma, which is important, and we experienced this, and we should talk about it. But I felt very emotional. And it was because I was like, oh, we're just having joy, because we're together, we're celebrating each other's bodies, like, it felt intimate and beautiful. And it was all different ages and like, very diverse. And then I thought, like, that's actually what self care does look like, like being able to be in community, and, as a healthcare provider, I spend so much time taking care of our community's, like collective trauma, you know, and I and I feel like that's why I went into this field. But then I don't get the opportunity all the time to be a part of the joy and resilience as well. And I talked to a lot of other trans therapists and healthcare providers about this. We often have these spaces where there–those are–there–that's our clients and our patients?

Jones-Williams: Yeah.

Levitt: [Simultaneously] And especially when I when I was, you know, 20 years in New York City, working at Callen-Lorde, which is where all the, you know queer and trans people go, working at a trans clinic, a community healthcare network, there were boundaries around like, parties, I could be a part of or celebrations, I could be a part of, um, just to not make patients or community members uncomfortable as being their healthcare provider. And so I didn't think about self care, you know, I thought, like, I'm taking care of the community. And that's the job that I've taken on, and I'm—and I love it, it's like, I can't imagine not doing it. But then how do I get to have those spaces that are affirming? And you know, how do we think about healthcare differently around like, yes, your community is also going to be maybe taking care of you, and that's wonderful! Like, there's a way in which I know if I see another trans clinician or therapist, I'm like, depending on how comfortable I feel with them, I can kind of relax and feel a level of trust that I wouldn't necessarily feel otherwise, where at least they understand some of the barriers that I face in life, so, I think being in community is self care. And also, you know, we, my—my partner and I have a now six year old, moved to Stanford, Connecticut, mostly because we're like, Brooklyn is our home, but it's a really hard place to—people do it, but it's a really hard place to raise a kid and have space, especially during COVID, which is when we moved. And so now we have like, better quality of life, where we have space and nature and all of this self care, but we have less community. So it's been interesting to navigate that, like, it's wonderful to walk outside and like be in nature and have space and not be in the grind of New York City. Um, but that's where like our community and our people are. So, we're doing a lot of like, back and forth. So I think self care looks like having space and having nature and the beach, and also still being connected to community. [Pause] Yeah, I think that answers your question.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, I think that makes a lot of sense. I would say I, like, can relate to wanting to leave New York City sometimes, but that's the thing that I worry about the most, is community? So—

Levitt: Right.

Jones-Williams: But I was gonna ask you, like, maybe, maybe you could hark back to one of your earliest memories of New York City and speak to when you were in New York City. And if you want to expand on what it's been like to leave New York City and now live in Stanford, Connecticut, I would love to hear, like, even more about it.

Levitt: Yeah. I mean, New York City will always be my home. It—I lived in all these different places, but it's definitely New York City. And I remember when I was still in Boston, I was only in

Boston for that gender and cultural studies program. I took the Chinatown bus from Boston to New York, like, first it was every weekend. And that's also where I met my partner, who is a native New Yorker, so I would always come visit him, but, um, I started taking it during the week. That's when I was like, I gotta move, [laughing] because it's like a Wednesday, and I'm like, on a 4-hour bus for like 2 days just to get to New York City and back. And I started going to Callen-Lorde as a patient too, from Boston. At that time, I wasn't connected to Boston, like, healthcare as much. And so I was on that bus all the time. I was like, clearly, I need to move. But New York City felt really intimidating to me. It just felt like the subway, all the people, I will not be able to get around. And finally, I just was like, all right, if I'm spending almost every day of the week in New York City, maybe I should stop paying rent in Boston and actually move. So I moved in 2005 to New York. And my partner is also trans, was a trans guy. So we, you know, have a lot of like, in common around trans organizing. And he's Black, so we also have a lot of like, organizing around interracial relationships and like being, you know, working on being allies and all of that stuff. So I moved to New York, but we were very careful about not being codependent because we'd come out of codependent relationships. So we didn't spend like any time with each other when I was in New York, just to like be careful in our—how we were building our relationship, we were also in an open relationship. And so I did a lot of, like, discovering things on my own? And it was just one of my favorite times. Like I got one of these, I don't even know if they make these books anymore. It was like the Insider Guide to New York City, like really [both laughing]—actual book, like it wasn't online. And I would like highlight different things. And I would, um, I was working at this international LGBTQ organization called IGLHRC (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission), which was like the worst acronym ever. It was like, the International Something Something Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. So that was my first job in New York City, and it was in the Empire State Building of all places. [Laughing] So that's where I worked, which is just an intense, touristy place to work in. Um, and I started finding out—

Jones-Williams: [Laughing, simultaneously] Big Apple.

Levitt: Yeah, no, I really came in with a bang, and I was making like \$30,000 a year, which for New York, certainly people make less, but it was a tough salary for New York City. And I found like a sublet in Brooklyn and I just started doing all this exploring. And I feel like that was a really important time for me, like making my own relationships with people and finding queer and trans folks and going to Callen-Lorde, I think really helped me too, but I started getting involved in different like Jewish organizing, different anti-racist organizing and, and different trans and queer parties before I became a nurse. There is like pre-nursing, I got to be involved in these different parties and these different connections, and it was a great time. Like, it was just seeing myself represented, you know, finding all this community that I hadn't had before. And

so Brooklyn in particular, you know, finding all the people there. And then that's when I, I started as a health educator at Callen-Lorde, just teaching people about trans health and connect—and about hormones and about surgery, and then that's when I decided I want to, I fell in love with nursing and I was like, I want to be someone that can help create space for our community to see people like us and to feel comfortable in these visits. I just had seen so—myself and so many other people feel uncomfortable in healthcare visits. So all that to say, I had a great, you know, New York City, Brooklyn experience and then went into nursing, which is very difficult. Nursing as a field is quite conservative. There are a lot of radical nurses within the nursing field, but being a trans person in nursing school was, and this was in New York, this was at NYU, it was really rough. I was the only trans person. I would, you know, I just felt very unsafe. So it was a very hard time to, and that's why I'm so drawn to teaching nurses now, is because it felt like I couldn't concentrate on the nursing knowledge I was trying to learn because I was so uncomfortable in being trans or in all the binary language of women's health and men's health and how it was not inclusive of trans folks at all. Um, but yeah, New York is like an interesting, you know, wonderful and queer and trans space and then a really conservative nursing world that I got into, and then started working in hospitals and Callen-Lorde and those sorts of places. And after the move to Stanford, kind of random, we just, my partner and I just felt like, and there's a lot around having a kid, like he also as a trans guy carried our child, which was his own experience in New York City, um, which is quite awful. Like there were a few OBGYN providers who did—wouldn't even see us, you know, because he's trans and they didn't understand it, which was an interesting time because I was doing all these trainings for healthcare providers and here I am on the other side of it being like, you can't not see us, like [laughing] what? Do I have to do a train—I mean, I did a training, actually on the—he gave birth at Mount Sinai and I did a training for the unit, like before —e I didn't even get paid for it, I just did a training for the whole unit for the nurses to be like, there's a trans guy that's going to deliver at this hospital and we're not going to go through this if it's going to be a traumatic experience, so here's what you need to do. And luckily they mostly, mostly did it. So, um, you know, having a child in Brooklyn, especially as, really when COVID started, we're like, we had already been thinking about it, but we're like, we got to get out of here because we don't have space, and we're sort of all on top of each other, and we need a better quality of life. It just felt really a draining place to be in. And so we were looking at upstate New York and different places, and then randomly Stanford came around because it's still a really quick Metro North trip to Grand Central, and, um, I had gotten this job at Yale for teaching nursing students, which is in Connecticut too. So, and then my partner worked at Transgender Law Center and he works from home. He's also a nurse, but he got burnt out from nursing. And so he was like a hospice and RN—an, um, ER nurse. And then he got this job where he gets to work from home. So we're like, let's just, you know, have some space. We need some people out here. It's a different world, for sure. There's some really sweet people? Like, I feel like I've learned that straight cis

people can be friendly and nice. [Laughing] I wasn't really aware of that before. And so we have all these neighbors who are all, like, straight cis folks and they, like, bake us cookies. And here we're like this Black and white trans couple with a child and they're bringing us cookies. And I of course brought my New York City energy to be like, what's in these cookies? I'm like really suspicious of them. Like, why are they so nice to us? What's going on? [Both laughing] They take care of our kids, they take care of our dogs, like, our kid loves school here. So I think for our family, it was a good decision, but it's been tough to feel like we're finding other people. There's some queer organizing here, like queer parents organizing, and we knew it wasn't going to be the same as Brooklyn, but luckily we're close enough that even though our life is really different, like there's just a comfort that we have that's nice that certainly you have in New York City, and I love going back there, but things just feel a little bit easier in some ways. Harder in other ways, but easier in some ways around parenting.

Jones-Williams: Yeah. I was going to ask you about parenting, if you felt comfortable to talk about it, like what that's like and if there's any way in which you feel like you and your partner are parenting that's different than the way that you were parented and just how transness is incorporated, like within your parenting. Um, yeah, whatever you'd like to share regarding that subject.

Levitt: Yeah. That's like, I mean, how much time do you have? [Both laughing] That looks, that looks like a lot. Will we—

Jones-Williams: Well, we still have time, so you can, you can go.

Levitt: [Simultaneously] There's a lot about parenting. I feel like every day is like a new adventure with parenting, but I actually never wanted a kid before. I wasn't—that wasn't a part of what I thought I would have in my life. Um, and then my partner and I have been together 20 years, so we have been together quite some time. And also we share a lot of these trans stories that I've been telling, which is really amazing to have this historical — I mean, he's a native New Yorker, so he's been born and raised Brooklyn, he has way more stories than I have. He was like a part of some really amazing organizing when he was like 15. But he's pretty special, so he would also be a good person for this. But he and I, you know, got together and it wasn't until we had been together 10 years or so where we started to think like, hey, we both weren't interested in kids. But now that we've, like, experienced this connection we have with each other and our connection to the community, it just started to come up more. So then we talked more about it and, um, really got this amazing doula who, that lives in Brooklyn and is like a trans-sensitive doula to kind of talk us through some of the process. And we ended up going through like, there's a lot of different ways of how we were going to have a child, but we ended

up using a sperm, you know, like a sperm banking, which is its own weird experience where you're like taking it, I don't know, it's very strange. [Laughing] But we had tried first with someone we knew and that didn't work out, so then we went this route. But the experience of going through, as I was talking about before, the experience of going through like the OBGYN world as a trans couple, as like two male passing people, you know, the looks we would get in the waiting rooms, like, they, you know, even in New York City, just the OBGYN providers who just were very uncomfortable and we're like, it's actually, the care is the same. Like you're providing the same care. I don't know what the big deal is. But it was tough. So, that process was hard and then we had our kid who's amazing. But when we started, when our kid was born, we used they pronouns for, um, now she identifies as she, but we used they pronouns and that was really an experience. Like in our minds, we felt like we don't want to put this gender on this child. We actually asked for them not to tell us when the, you know, they do the like announcements to girl or boy. We're like, please don't share this with us and please don't make an announcement when our kid is born, which they had a really hard time with. They did not know how to deal with that [laughing]. And then they also had pink and blue things and we're like, don't use that. And they were like, what do we do? I was like, there are other colors. They had a real problem. It was like they were thrown for a loop. They didn't know what to do. But the process of having a kid that we didn't ascribe a, a gender to, I learned so much. Like just how difficult it is for people, like in the preschool system, this was in New York, like family members, people on the street that just ask you if it's a girl or a boy. And so there was a lot of resistance to people – you know, I remember when we said like there was somebody asked us on the street, like, oh, you have a girl or a boy? And we're like, we don't know yet. And they couldn't process that information, it made them very uncomfortable. But the most important thing for us is that we were raising a kid that didn't feel like they were forced into one or the other. But there were things we couldn't account for, like preschools that could not use they. They just had a really hard time with it. We just talked about gender stereotypes. We're like, if you can't use they, which doesn't seem that hard, but if you're like not able to, just making sure you didn't put our child into like a certain stereotype of gender, and it was just really tough all around to—and that's, and then I think about it because I'm like, that's New York City, I imagine how hard it is in other places. But just within the school system and with family and friends. And then when she was four, she just came home and she was like, Dad and Daddy, which she has decided who's Dad and who's Daddy. She's like, I'm a girl and I use she/her pronouns. I'm like, great. That's why we did this. But of course I, for some reason, my partner always makes fun of me, I had a hard time with it, because I was like, how do you know? And he was like, how does anyone know! Like, that's the whole point. We don't, nobody knows how they know, they just know. But I was questioning it. Like, I can't believe I did this whole process. And now I'm questioning why you want to identify as a girl, which was interesting, right? Because I think for me, I was like, is this because all your friends are girls? Is this because you think you love

dresses and you think that means you have to be a girl? But she was just like, Daddy, this is who I am. I'm like, right, right. I have to listen to that. So it was very interesting, you know, just raising a kid and thinking about gender, and, um, it's amazing to have been doing trainings on gender and all of this for so long. And then when it's your own kid, you're like, wow, I had never imagined how hard this would be and how challenging it would be to just be like, whatever gender you want to be is fine because you got to deal with, you know, the rest of the world. So we've learned a lot about parenting and about ourselves and about our relationship and just trying to like, have a kid that understands all these different dynamics. I don't know. It's a battle every day to think about, like, how do you parent? Because I think there's a part of it that's also like you're reparenting yourself, it's very different. You were asking about how I was raised. So I wasn't I wasn't like necessarily super pushed into, uh, being a girl, but I def—it was definitely like, all the pinks and the dresses, so I guess in some ways I was. But they were like, you can be any kind of girl. I think that's, they sort of felt like you don't have, you know, you don't have to wear dresses, you could be a girl that wears pants, you know. So they felt they were being really radical about that. They had not considered that maybe I didn't want to be a girl at all. And I have a younger brother, so we were definitely put into this, like, the girl does this and the boy does this. And so they're very loving parents. But they definitely were like, this is the role you're in. And they had a process of when I came out. It was a lot of coming out. Came out to them as bisexual. Then I came out to them as a lesbian. Then I came out to them as trans. So understandably, they were a little like, which is the one? Like, we don't know what we're supposed to do here. Uh, but they had the hardest time with the trans one, like, that was just really, really hard for them. They just were sort of attached to having a daughter, and they already had a son, so they just felt like they couldn't make that shift. And so there was a process when I was in college when I was, stopped talking to them because they wouldn't call me Nathan. Like, I'd changed my name, I'd told them I changed my name. And they couldn't call me he. And so I just said, this was right before I was going to get chest surgery. And I said, I don't want to come out of this surgery with you still calling me this old name and this pronoun – I don't know if I was – so if you can't get it together, like, you can't be there for me after surgery. Because they really wanted to be, well, they didn't want me to get the surgery. But then once they knew it was happening anyway, they were like, well, we want to be there. And I was like, I'm not waking up from this surgery to an old name, you know, that I don't identify with. So, they had their own process. They finally, I told them, I was like, go find some other parents. I can't be, I can't process with you, your grief. I mean, they would literally say, like, they were grieving their daughter. And I'm like, some people actually lost their child? Like, they died? So maybe you should think about how your child's over here. Um, and I found them like a PFLAG group that had, was—that also had parents, you know, with trans kids. And that was transformative to them. Especially my mom. Like, they started, they could kind of work out all their parent issues with other parents that had gone through it already. And they, it was like

probably a year we stopped talking. And then, I mean, on and off talking. And then they went through this PFLAG group, and they came back, like, different. And they were really supportive and affirming. And, you know, they certainly make mistakes. But it transformed our relationship, and my mom became a, like, a support person to my friends' moms that were going through it, which was really sweet. So I would just, you know, I have a friend whose mom just wasn't, couldn't deal with trans stuff. And I'd be like, here, here's my mom's number. Call her. And so she had this little support group for a while. It was really cute. So they've come a long way. Like, certainly my upbringing, I'm teaching my kids differently than they did, but I also feel like they did have a process that they were able to kind of work through and, um, come out the other side, you know?

Jones-Williams: You feel that that, um, shows up in a multi-generational way, now that you're parenting? Are they, are they still around, your parents? And do you all hang—

Levitt: Yeah, we do. My parents are very close with my child. Like, very, very close. Like, they're on FaceTime, like, every day. They come to visit a lot. They come, they come, they live in Florida still, which, they have finally come to terms with the fact that we are not going to, they want us to come back to visit, and we're like, that state is so scary for us. Like, we cannot, I love the beaches, but we cannot be there [laughing]. So they visit Connecticut a ton. And we actually, it's part of why we got our first home, because we got a space that they can stay with us, you know, and they can be here more and they can help with childcare, so they're way more involved in my life than they ever have been because they're grandparents and they really love it. So that's super sweet. And I also had a grandma who has passed, my mom's mom. We were so, so close. Like, so close. I just have a very sweet story of when I came out to her as trans, because I thought, she's not gonna get it. She's a grandma. She doesn't know anything about this. I was terrified because we were so close. And so it was like, we were just having bagels and cream cheese. Like, that's what we do as, as Jews, you know, we eat a lot of bagels and cream cheese together. So we were having—and it was one day I was like, I can't hide this anymore. I had identified—I was identifying as genderqueer at that time. I definitely looked different, but I didn't look the way I look now. I wasn't on hormones or anything. I just like, I had pink hair and a lot of piercings and I cannot imagine it, but I did. And I had really short hair. So already I'm sure my grandma was like, something's going on here. Uh, and so I was having the bagels. I sat with her and I was like, grandma, there's something I want to tell you. I'm not sure you're going to understand it at all. You may never heard of it before. And this was at the time that my parents were having a hard time, my brother was having a hard time, everyone couldn't call me by Nathan. And so I said, I'm trans. That's what this, this means this. I'm, I'm going by Nathan, I want to use he, him pronouns. And then she just like sat there for a while and I was like, oh no, this is the end of our relationship. This is really hard. And she said, are you happy? And I said,

yeah. And she said, all right, pass me another bagel, Nathan. And from then on, she used Nathan and he and him, she told all of her friends at the club, [laughing] which is like the old age home that she was at. She would teach them about trans stuff. She would correct my brother and my parents and be like, get it together. You need to call him this. So I just felt like it was a really special, beautiful relationship, and also kind of counters that narrative that other, that people of that age don't get it. I mean, certainly some people don't, but that was it. She just got it right away. She's like, I just want you to be happy. If you're happy, that's great.

Jones-Williams: How, what was, what's your grandmother's name? But what was her name?

Levitt: Jan. Grandma Jan.

Jones-Williams: Grandma Jan?

Levitt: Yeah. She was a model in New York city. She was Miss, uh, they used to do Miss Subways in the 1920s. I just learned that.

Jones-Williams: What's a Miss Subway?

Levitt: So Miss Subway is, all of these models would apply to be Miss Subway. And that meant that you get your picture on the subway, like, you know, as like, Miss Subway, the model for you, each year would be like Miss Subway 1921, Miss Subway – so she was like, Miss Subway 1924 or something. And she was plastered on [laughing]. It was pretty exceptional. She would wear, like, leopard skin pants all the time, like really tight leopard skin pants. And she was a model.

Jones-Williams: Wow.

Levitt: Yeah.

Jones-Williams: And she was living in, uh, Florida, too, at the time?

Levitt: Yes. She grew up in New York, in Brooklyn, actually, in Brooklyn and I think Queens also. And then she moved to Florida, so she lived near us where I grew up in Florida.

Jones-Williams: That's a beautiful story.

Levitt: Right? It's kind of, it's one of my favorite stories.

Jones-Williams: It's – yeah. It makes me emotional.

Levitt: Yeah, totally. It was a really, it was just like so quick, you know, and I sort of, it was a moment that I also learned like, this doesn't have to be hard for people. Like each person at like, I don't know, I guess at that point she was like 70 or something, or maybe close to 80, and she just got it right away.

Jones-Williams: [Pause, sigh] So, like, effortless.

Levitt: Right? It was. She's like, first of all, are you happy? Second of all, I'm going to use this name and I need that bagel. [Laughing] Like, it was just like nothing, you know, she seemed unfazed, and she never really, and there was never any like follow up, like, you know, that she had a bunch of questions. It was just like, all right, this is what you want and you're happy and that's it.

Jones-Williams: Do you feel that since that time, did she, even if it was like, it sounds like she was, it was easy for her, to just like accept it for some reason, like maybe, maybe it says something about the person that she was.

Levitt: Mm, yeah.

Jones-Williams: Did she also like, reorient herself towards you, like, in an effortless way, the way that she asked you questions or things about your life? Like, did she shift or?

Levitt: Yeah.

Jones-Williams: Yeah.

Levitt: It did feel like she just, [pause] I don't know, she was, I mean, because she was a model, she was really into fashion and like dresses and all of that, so I thought she'd have a problem with the fact that I was not going to be wearing those kinds of clothes anymore because she was pretty into, like, getting me dresses and, but she did really shift. In fact, she, she like taught me how to tie my tie, like really, really sweet. She used to tie my grandfather's ties. It was like a really beautiful moment where she just kind of shifted so easily to being like, okay, this is your gender. And I remember one day she said, I think your hair is too short. And I immediately panicked because I was like, oh no, she wants me to have like a long, girly hair again. But it wasn't that. She thought it was too short, I did—she was right, actually [laughing], I had like cut

my hair really short. Like, I don't know. I thought it was cool, but it was like a buzz cut. :It was, it didn't work for me. It works for some people, it didn't work for me. So for her, she was just like, I think you should have a little bit more hair on top and a, like, curl a little, and then you could have pp it's actually how I do my hair now. Like you could have a little fade over here. So it wasn't at all about gender. She just was like, your hair doesn't look good. But I immediately made it about gender being like, oh, you want long, girly hair? Like I had very long hair. And she's like, no, you just, that look is not great for you.

Jones-Williams: Wow. That's so cool.

Levitt: I know. She was really special.

Jones-Williams: She sounds like she was a very special person.

Levitt: Yeah.

Jones-Williams: Do you feel that, um, I was going to ask you, um, if there's anyone in your life that was really important to you, that along your journey – and it sounds like maybe your grandmother is one of those people, but was there anybody else that comes to mind, um, that was like a beacon to you?

Levitt: Yeah. So definitely my grandma. And I think that, I wish I could remember the name of this trans person that spoke at that conference in, in Florida.

Jones-Williams: Yeah.

Levitt: But I think what I remember about him, mostly, one, that he was trans and I had never seen a trans man before, and then also the person speaking next to him was genderqueer, but that they were older. Like I was probably at that time, I'm like the worst at math, but I feel like I was in my 20s or something. And they were 40 something, which is interesting now to think about as now I'm 45 and I got called a trans elder for the first time in my life. And I was like, nah, I couldn't process it. I was like, I don't, how am I a trans elder? Like I think a lot about aging. And so I'd seen these two people that were organizing and that they were like, in their forties. And I remember that was a huge moment for me. One, to meet my first like transgender queer folks, but also to be like, you made it to 40 something and, and you're doing all right, you know? Like you, you had a hard life, but you've made it this far, so. My grandma was sort of the person that, like, felt, like. accepted me no matter what. And then these folks at this conference were, like, the first visual representation I'd seen of people—and that they were

older, and they, like, were surviving, you know? So that felt really big. And then I think just like intimate relationships that I had, like I've had a lot of relationships with trans people, both intimate and friendships, and I feel like those relationships were really important. I spent a lot of time in relationships with cis people, were, and I mean, it's changed now, but in the past where it just felt like I was always explaining myself? I'm like, I feel like I do that in my work all the time, so it was like, I don't want to be doing this in a relationship, too. Um, certainly people are different now, you know, some people, at least, but I actually was just talking at that trans celebration weekend to this, like, 20-year-old who called me the trans elder. [Laughing] Um, who, about, what–

Jones-Williams: [Simultaneously] I was going to ask you, who called you–

Levitt: Yeah, it was a random person at that trans celebration weekend – may have even been in the trans oral history presentation, like, they were in the audience, and, I think it was actually, yeah, because they were asking about, they're having trouble getting hormones. There was, the waiting list at Callen-Lorde was like really long, and somehow they heard that I was a healthcare provider, so someone pointed them to me, and I was like, oh, here – so I also work, I have too many jobs. But I also work at FOLX, which is, um, doing, like, telemedicine care for trans folks? So, um, which I, you know, I think there's pros and cons because they're like, it's a, you have to pay for it, and although they have like sliding scale, they're starting to accept insurance, but they didn't start that way. So I think it's not for everybody, but it is a really great thing for people that feel uncomfortable leaving their home, or they experience a lot of barriers in healthcare, or they live in a place in the country where they have nowhere to go. They can just open their computer and see me and I can prescribe them hormones and I get licensed in all these different states. So I did say to this person, I can help you through FOLX, or I can help you through, and my colleagues that work in all these different places. And then they had asked me how old I was. I think they thought I was closer to their age. And so I had said 45 and they had like a real reaction. I was like, oh, it's like old, and, “You're a trans elder.” And I was like, this is not a conversation I wanted to have, but they called me that and I just felt like, okay, I guess that's where I am. So, getting back to where I started with the story, they were talking about dating while trans, and talking about all the different apps that they're on and how inclusive, you know, how they're finding those people. And I did, then I did start to feel like a trans elder because I said, “Well, in my day” – already, I started “in my day,” so I'm, I'm already there. [Laughing] Like, in my day, we would go on Craigslist. Like, literally Craigslist that I don't even know still exists, but on the computer, like you didn't have it on your phone, you didn't have those kinds of phones. And you'd put an ad up, right? For like, you're a trans person that wants to hook up with, whatever. And then you'd, you;d have to wait by your computer for like, the response. You couldn't go anywhere! You couldn't like, be out at the club or at a bar. You had to

like sit back, like refresh. And at that time, so this is like, 2001 or something, 2002. There was like a trans group within Craigslist, but it was clearly they only knew about trans women, and really like transvestites too. They didn't know anything about trans men, and I'll never forget, this was like telling a person the story about how this guy was interested. And I explained that I was a trans guy, or gender queer, and they didn't understand, like even up to the point where I was, you know, about to hug this person. And they said, why didn't you dress? And I was like, what do you mean? And they're like, like, you know, like why aren't you dressing? And then I realized that they thought I was a trans woman or a transvestite. And they were expecting me to show up like, in makeup and a dress and a wig potentially. And that was my entry into like, this is what it's like for trans folks and trans men in particular or nonbinary people that were assigned female at birth, trying to navigate this like sex and dating scene on Craigslist where you're just like refreshing your computer. And then this person was like, I can't even process this information. They're like, you're telling me you couldn't leave your house, you had to sit by your computer and you were in a group that didn't even understand, like, your body. And I was like, yeah, that's what we had. [Laughing] It's like a real moment of things are different now, and there's all these apps and trans folks are on it, and it does make me feel like a trans out there when I talk about it.

Jones-Williams: Yeah. But also it sounds, I don't know, there's something so cool about, like – I mean, challenging, of course, being you on Craigslist and then like meeting up with someone who, you know, you're already trying to find connection, and then some, that person being confused about your identity? But having like, gone through that, it feels like, I don't know, you stand on quite a ground today.

Levitt: [Laughing] Yeah.

Jones-Williams: That experience, I think, is really interesting and to, you know, to have come from there and be where you are now must be, um – is like, a wealth of knowledge for someone who is 20 years old and, and has no concept.

Levitt: [Simultaneously] Yeah. Right. That's true. Yeah, yeah. It's so true. And I—I've also been realizing, or reflecting on, that I, that I still expect that? I mean, I think that's what trauma is about, like, or-or not – yeah, like trauma, or difficult experiences, where I still expect to have to explain my body or like, what being trans is, because I spend all of my work time doing that, whether through teaching or through workplaces or healthcare centers or, you know, with doctors and nurses or, I think I assume that there's gonna always have to be that explanation where—so some of the younger trans folks, and not to say older trans folks don't experience this, but who are like, yeah, I just get on the app – and like, I'm kind of blown away by the fact

that they either don't have to even say that they're trans, or they say it and it's not an issue at all, I'm talking about if they're hooking up with people who are not trans. I still am like a little blown away by it. Even though it's been a long time, I still think that like, I'm a little sort of envious of the experience of walking through the world and just, and certainly not everyone is accepted in any way, but I think like navigating the sort of sex and dating scene, especially in New York City and Brooklyn, like where there's so many people, there's not necessarily the same, like, fear that someone's gonna be like, I don't know what trans is. And it certainly can happen, but it's just a little bit of a different experience. And I talked to a lot of older trans folks about this too, that we just like sit there like, what is this experience like? Where you just are like, "oh, it doesn't matter." It doesn't matter. I was like, what is this?

Jones-Williams: Yeah, that's incredible, like.

Levitt: Right.

Jones-Williams: And I – I mean, to be a little envious, I think is fair, you know, to kind of have, like, maybe a little bit of compassion for like your younger self and be like, wow, that was really challenging, and I maybe, I wish I hadn't had to go through that. Do you feel that having gone through that, there's anything that you, on the flip side versus envy, feel like it's given you? Like it feels like you have like such a wealth of like, just a richness of experience of like, some struggle and having experienced what you experienced also helps you in what you're doing, um.

Levitt: Yeah, I think so. I think there's a way in which I'm like, appreciate things more because I remember a time when there wasn't as much acceptance. And again, there's lots of places where there's not, but when, so, coming back, I'm coming back to this Trans Celebration Weekend a lot because it was really transformative for me, and it just happened. It was, like, September, right? I think that's what happened. My sense of time is really off, but it recently happened. And I think because I've gone through what I've gone through, and certainly trans folks have gone through like a lot more difficult experiences than I have, but, because I've gone through like, you know, sort of having to always explain myself, um, or to convince people to take care of us and to care about our health and our wellbeing, that being at this weekend that was like so much again about joy and resilience and like celebrating our bodies and being together, I felt that the appreciation I had for it felt differently than the younger folks? Like the younger folks absolutely appreciate it. But I sat back with my like 45 year old friend, trans guy friend and being like, could you imagine if we had this when we were 20, and it–it wasn't as much envious as it was, like, appreciation, like how wonderful that these folks do have this and that they, and we have it too by being there, but like that they can experience this at a younger age too, where they can just like feel pride in their bodies and feel like, sexy and feel

appreciated and feel connected and seeing themselves represented, and we were like sitting back and crying. And this was like a, like a sex party, [laughing] maybe a little out of place? I mean, it wasn't only that, it was also like connection, but there was like an aspect of that. And we were like just emotional. The old, the trans elders crying. They were probably like, what's wrong with them? But I do think that it was like a happy emotional thing, you know, it was like, this is so wonderful that this is where we're at, that we can like take over Fire Island and celebrate ourselves and just be, like, appreciated, and seeing trans bodies everywhere, especially on the beach naked? Like that was transformative, it was just like, right, I don't have to worry. There's just people with bodies that look like mine all around. And so there was an appreciation for it. And there was also like a moment where I connected with my other, you know, older friend and being like, we did in some ways, like, we didn't do all of this, but we helped pave the way for some of this. And I had never thought about myself like that. I don't like think about that at all, but I've had people say, like, folks that are just starting at Callen-Lorde now, like I worked there 20 years ago, maybe, or something around that, like 2005. So less than 20 years. And folks will be like, oh yeah, I know of you. You started this, like, trans health education program there and we didn't have it before. Or like, you know, all of these different things that I think of—I felt really, like I made a difference, you know, and that even though it was a really hard time to make those things happen, it's nice to feel like, you know, I helped open some doors, which is really great. And so that way it doesn't, yes, there's a piece of it that's envy, but there's also a piece of like, it feels really nice to be able to see something that you helped make happen, and see how things have grown beyond you, you know, and see the kind of, like joy, that trans people can have. And it's not only about, again, about our trauma and our suffering, which exists, but we also need to have these joyful times too.

Jones-Williams: I just had myself on mute because my radiator is so loud, but I think it's fine.

Levitt: I remember those radiators that I used to have, too.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, it keeps me, like. Yeah. [Both laughing] Yeah. It sounds like it's – your joy contains, like, I don't know, that maybe you're able to tap into like a pretty deep well of joy that contains that experience that you've just spoken to that is uniquely different than somebody who is younger?

Levitt: Right.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, I don't know, I'm inspired by the way you're talking about joy, and if that brings anything else to mind about defining your joy and, um, like, how that feels – if there's

any other things beyond, you know, being naked on the beach, which sounds so joyful, incredibly joyful. Yeah. Is there anything else that you would like to share more on that subject?

Levitt: Yeah, I mean, I've been thinking more about it, like, again, because it's been so much not about joy, like it's been so much about just like keeping us alive, right, and like connecting us to resources that people need, and, like, getting folks off the street or like connecting people to needle exchanges, like all the different things where it was more about like life or death, which it still is for many folks, of course. But like, I think of, another job that I had was working at NYU in the gender affirming surgery program, so I was, um, after I did the director of trans health within Community Healthcare Network, I started at the surgery program and it was a very difficult job. Like it's a very, very busy surgical practice where they see trans folks from all over and do every trans– gender affirming surgery. And I'm not someone who's like, feels that gender affirming surgery is like the end all be all for our community, I think it's like some people really want and need it and some people it's not something they can access or something that they want. But there was something about like, meeting with trans folks, like there's the surgeon who's not trans, the whole team who's not trans and then there's myself who is, and then meeting, being able to meet with folks and like talk them through preparing for surgery and thinking about all these other factors – that it's not just this body part or whatever, or your body, it's also about like your mind-body connection, about, like, how are you going to see your body differently? How are you going to take care of it differently? How, what are your relationships and sexual relations is going to look like afterwards? What is your mental health like? Like all of these different holistic factors that I felt like I brought to these visits, which is hard. And finally I didn't have a lot of time in these visits, but afterwards seeing folks, like, with gratitude to being able to be in a trusted space where they could talk to another trans person and talk about their body and maybe even say that they weren't happy, you know, after surgery, because there were other issues that had nothing to do with their surgery. Like their surgery didn't fix their mental health issues – no, although it can sort of improve some things – or it didn't fix their housing issue, or their relationships, or created more relationship issues. But those are experiences which were very, that was a very difficult job, but it felt like, um, these connections of like talking about our bodies and the way we exist in the world, even in a very medical setting, um, I got to experience the community and joy in a way, like in suffering and difficult things. And it made me think, it made me, like, reflect on my own. Like, what was it like when I had surgery? Like I remember specifically after I had chest surgery – and we only had one, this was a real like back in my day, we had like two surgeons maybe. Like at that time we didn't, there were not a lot of options, and there was one in particular in San Francisco. And I lived in Boston, so it was a bit of a trip. We all went to, and they didn't take insurance. I just said this to a patient the other day. The patient was like, oh, I'm really, I'm gonna, I want to have chest surgery and my insurance covers it. I just have to cover a few things, you know, travel

there and all of that. And they asked me, you know, I have a lot of patients that ask me about my experience just because it's nice to be with another trans person. And I was like, oh, I got chest surgery 20 years ago and we all had to fundraise for our surgeries. We didn't have insurance coverage. And the person was like, I thought this was always covered. Like, I thought it was just always covered. So it was a moment of being like, a lot of people don't know their own history, like around what we used to do too, rather. Like the testosterone spray, like the—having fundraising parties for each other. It was every weekend, we'd have another like surgery fundraiser party. And we didn't have money, but we were just helping to support each other to get surgery. But I remember afterwards, I was so excited about surgery. It was really important to me. And then I went into like a little bit of depression, because I was very happy with my surgery and that needed to happen for me. But then my body looked like a body that I had never seen before, and I felt like my healthcare providers had never seen before, and I felt like the people that maybe I wanted to hook up with or have relationships with, they had never seen before, so it created this whole other aspect of post-surgery that I wasn't prepared for. And so I—so it connects to the job that I felt like I was doing for people, was like preparing them for what's gonna happen after surgery, that like there might be new issues that come up. You might have complete happiness, everything's wonderful. And it helped me reflect on my own experience, help people really deal with like the healthcare system, what was gonna happen. And then think back to like, I did have joy after surgery, but because I wasn't prepared for what was gonna happen afterwards, I ended up having a lot of sadness and, like, isolation, and fear, that I had done this permanent thing that then made it seem like I could only go to certain providers that understood it or, I have to keep explaining myself every time. I just went away from the joy question. I feel like it's, um, you know, connected. So it's like, what are the ways in which I could have experienced joy, but because I wasn't really prepared for, connected to understand all these different aspects, I didn't get to have that joyful experience. And now I feel like I'm finding it more, like I have a family, and I love my child, and I love our family structure, and I love teaching, and I love all these other things that I'm finding joy from, that I think is like actually more recent, like really reflecting on the ways in which I didn't or wasn't able to experience joy in the past.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, I mean, it sounds like also there's a moment at which there's like an intersection, where you maybe could have experienced joy if someone held space for you to also be like, this is hard and contains sadness. And if that had been okay, you— like what I'm receiving from it is maybe that would be like treating you like a whole person too, and also have sadness around, and loss. And then that would maybe have helped you, like, find joy and been a really radical space of a certain kind of joy.

Levitt: Great, great, totally. Yeah, I feel like that's really true. And then coming back to the part about how we all have this narrative that we had to tell our therapists or our healthcare providers in order to have access to healthcare, there's a way in which it like, didn't allow us to be our full authentic selves, because we had to say these certain things. Like for example, I had to say to this therapist, like I've known my whole life that I wanted to be a boy or a man, which is absolutely not true. Like, I actually much later than a lot of, I mean, well, there's no judgment about it or comparing, but I just feel like a lot of the narrative we hear is that people knew when they were young and a lot of people did, certainly, for sure, and a lot of people now know it when they're young, but I did not till college, which is like a lot later than the narrative that you often hear about trans people. But I could not say that to the therapist or the healthcare provider because then they would doubt that I really knew I was trans. So it's just like, I think there were all these narratives that we had to say to get access to things, that didn't allow us to be our full self? And then I think impact, I mean, I can speak for myself, definitely impacted me. Like it wasn't—it didn't allow me to be present in my body, in my experience, because there was always this way you had to talk about it to have access to things. And I think in some ways it started to really, like, sink in like, oh, I can't talk about who I really am, or, like, my real story, you know, because I won't get the healthcare I need, or I won't get the connection that I need. You know, even within the community, that can happen too. Like, you know, people feeling like “this is the way.” I remember when I was identifying more as genderqueer, there were definitely, like, trans men in particular that were, like, pretty nasty to me, like about genderqueer— not everybody, but just being like, that's not real. Kind of like how people talk about sort of, you know, awful narrative around, like, people identify as bisexual and people say like, oh, you have to just pick a side. There was the same sort of thing with being genderqueer. It was like, just decide one gender or the other, and I was like, I thought this was liberatory. I thought we were, like, having a gender liberation moment by being like, we're genderqueer, we're nonbinary, we're this. And then you're telling me I have to identify as a man and I have to get surgery and hormones. And I think that's part of the why—the reason I was pushed against it for so long. Cause I was like, don't put me in a box, I was already in a box! I, like, wanna, you know, have a more liberatory experience, and so – but then, I wonder, I mean, I'm not really sure about this. I feel like it was very hard identifying as genderqueer, or like, nonbinary. It was very hard navigating healthcare. It was very hard explaining my gender. I would always get called she. Like I wanted to be called, I wanted no pronoun or they, but I would always be called she. So I think there was definitely a shift at some point where I was like, maybe I do feel more like a man and maybe I, you know, want these sorts of changes in my body. But there are times I wonder, like, if I had more openness and freedom at that time around gender, would I have necessarily taken this route? I'm not entirely sure. Like I'm pretty [laughing]—I'm pretty happy with, you know, the sort of changes from testosterone and chest surgery, but it's hard to really, like, go back to that time and say, what if I had known more about existing in all these different

kinds of genders in a way that was more open and free? Would I have taken this path? Not entirely sure, but, um, but all this to say like, I think that's what's most important in our community that people can feel like there's any path you can take. There's any sexuality you can have. Like, that was another thing too. Cause I identified as, like, queer, [where?] a lot of like in particular white, older, straight-identified trans men who were not very accepting to me, because I [wear just?]-because I, like, wanted to be with all different kinds of genders. And I also was, like, more effeminate than them, they were getting like really into that binary gender, which now I'm like, right, you wanted to pass. It makes sense. It's like, a safer experience in life. And you felt like to pass, you had to be like this asshole man, because that's what we learn about masculinity. So you, you know, you took on that role in order to fit in, and I get it. But I think the ways in which it affect-like, affected me was tough. I was like, do I have to be this kind of man? Cause that's not what I wanted. And that's when I actually got into, I would do a lot of teaching on trans feminism, which was, you know, going back to the coming out in a feminist sort of circle of people and understanding feminism. I started doing trainings on trans feminism and talking about like, one, how cisgender women and feminists, second wave in particular, could be more inclusive and understanding of trans identities and how actually all of this is connected. And then two was specifically like for trans men that were coming out with this misogyny that was very much taught to them, but they felt like they had to, they had to do, and the straightness too, like this very enforced, like heterosexuality that came with all these different dynamics. So I, I really loved doing that, cause I felt like it brought together all of the different feelings about gender and feminism and, you know, how we don't want to put ourselves in these more, you know, more rigid boxes, and coming out of these boxes, right? I have no idea what your question is-was, but I really went on a tangent. [Laughing]

Jones-Williams: I love your tangent. [Both laughing]

Levitt: I was like, wait, well, what's the question? I have no idea.

Jones-Williams: I think that's what oral history can feel like, in the best way.

Levitt: [Simultaneously] Yeah. I appreciate that [?]

Jones-Williams: I'd love to hear you talk more about trans feminism. Um, yeah, if-would that be something you'd want to talk more about?

Levitt: Yeah, I've been thinking about it a lot because I do trainings right now for the women's health nurse practitioners in midwifery departments about their language, and how, uh, they use "women" language and they're only referring to cisgender or non-transgender women, so it

reminded me of all this work I used to do, before, when I lived in Boston, so that's like 2002 or so, when I was in that gender and cultural studies program, where I would have these different workshops that I did. Like I did for a lot of feminist organizations. There's one called Australia in New York City that, um, that does a lot of funding. Now they're super trans inclusive, but at that time it was like a lot of second wave feminists, who were doing a lot of amazing work for women that was all for, you know, cisgender women, and their language was really exclusionary for trans people, and so that kind of workshop that I would do, I remember, cause it was like butcher paper, we didn't do PowerPoints, I did actual like butcher paper and markers and I put on it quotes from specifically women of color, feminist organizers like Audre Lorde and other folks, that were really like liberatory language that I was like, hey, look, this is the feminism that you talk about, but like, let's actually look at their language as being inclusive of, you know, Black women as being inclusive of, you know, maybe they didn't say trans people at the time, but the way they talked about gender was really inclusive, and, talking about systems of oppression and like all of this stuff. And so it was really cool to see cisgender women, or non-transgender women, and feminists, like, kissed in their language and understanding. And what I think I did well at the time was, like, understanding the barriers because I had been there too? Like I remember there was a time where I was a little like, what is this trans thing? Like, it feels like, it feels like it's, um, it's threatening to feminism, like, before I understood it and also myself, felt like a trans person. So I understood the fear behind it with cisgender women, with feminists that were like, this is gonna take away from all of our organizing and our history. And, or, like trans women are trying to co-opt women's space or trans men are selling out by becoming men. Like that was all the language at that time. And so I felt like I was able to be like, actually let's go back to the roots of feminism and, like, understand how white, you know, feminism has always been exclusive to trans, to, I'm sorry, to Black women and to, to women of color. And that hasn't been inclusive, but these are the ways that we can take some of the quotes of these historical organizers and be like, actually, including trans people just enriches the, you know, feminism and enriches the experience, and it's because of historical feminism that trans people can be whatever gender they wanna be because of all of that work. So there's something about affirming the fear, or affirming the history and organizing, and saying it's because of all that organizing that we have this space, and here are the ways that when you're not including them and it's going against what feminism is. So I feel like that was like a really exciting workshop that I used to do, although hard, because I'd be in communities that were—

Jones-Williams: [Simultaneously] When was that? Sorry to interrupt you, what—what year was that?

Levitt: Like 2000, like 2001 to 2005 is when I did a lot of that. So I'd be a part of, like, feminist organizations talking about trans inclusion and then be a part of trans spaces to talk about

feminism. Cause I feel like a lot of trans folks felt pushed out of feminism, understandably, but then they weren't incorporating some of the like, really amazing historical work that's been done around gender. So it's like two different pieces that were very different, but that were connected. And so I, I remember I'd make a lot of Venn diagrams of like, trans and feminists, I mean, that would be like, this is what we share. Um, that was actually one of my favorite things to do. And I, I just haven't really been back in it, but there—there are other people that talk about trans feminism for sure, but at that time, I didn't really know of people that were bringing that work together, both within feminists, non-trans circles, and then like, bringing feminism to trans, to think about feminism in different ways, and to understand history, and, um. And then I've worked at a—I've worked at too many jobs that sometimes I forget them, but there's this one in New York City in 2007 or '08, the Third Way Foundation is now called Third Wave Fund, but it used to be called Third Wave Foundation. Um, and it was like, about third wave feminism. And it's interesting, because it's very different now, like a—there's a trans person who has run the organization, there are tons of trans people involved in it, but when I worked there, which is like 2005, 2006, they felt very threatened by a trans person being involved. They hired me to—to help start their trans, they called it a trans and women funding program? They weren't ready for that, at the time. It was like definitely run by more second way feminists who felt like they should be inclusive, but when I actually came in and said, this is what you would need to do to be inclusive, to like work on your language, they're like, no, thank you. I was actually fired from there, it's the only job I've ever been fired from, which is ironic now because it's run by trans people and for trans people. And they don't necessarily know that history. In fact, I just talked to someone who didn't know anything about this history of this foundation, who has always been a foundation supporting women's organizing, really amazing work that's being done, but they kind of brought me in to help make some changes, but they weren't ready for those changes, you know. So it was like, a really tough – as I was doing these trans feminism workshops, and that was a part of, I think they were drawn to that and they were interested in that. But then like their funders, you know, their board were not on board for that kind of language. And they felt very threatened. They did feel like if you change women's language, or if you're more specific with what you mean by women – so if you're saying like women, do you mean just cisgender women? Do you mean trans women? Do you mean trans folk like assigned female at birth? They were not ready for that question. They were just, felt like if you change the word women at all, or you're more specific around the word women, that you're gonna erase all of the organizing and erase – I mean, people did literally say like you're erasing women. And I was like, that doesn't make any sense! But, um, I think people are still, I mean, the work that I'm doing now with like women's health nurse practitioners, and they still have the same thing. They don't wanna change the language or be more inclusive of the language. And then I'll say things like, okay, well, if you're talking about women's healthcare, do you want someone like me to be there? So if you're talking about, let's say like

fertility, birth control, all of these things, I'm someone that would come in for those services, a pap smear, let's say, but your language isn't—is not inclusive of me. But if you're gonna say women, but then you're not gonna get trans women, then are you actually saying— so all of this stuff, I feel like still exists now. But at that time, I was doing more organizing of trying to like bring people together by understanding where the resistance was around that language. And I think it helps me now today, in doing those—that kind of training, because I can start with like, let's just go right into the fears. We're not erasing women. In fact, we're expanding and being more inclusive. And actually this is like, you know, reproductive and, you know, gender care that we all need, so. Yeah, I think the trans feminism is like a root for a lot of the work that I'm doing now around working on our language and making OBGYN practices more inclusive, and — but it's hard. Even though that was almost 20 years ago, I feel like there's still that same language around that, that people have trouble with.

Jones-Williams: At that time, do you feel like, um, like where did you look to, like what examples did you look to, to like, get your toolkit, and like go into those spaces and be like s—, I don't know, it just sounds like that would be really challenging to like not really have, I don't, like, even though you say it exists today, I think it still is like, I still find in discourse, like it's not always integrated into the way that we think of women, um, or the way that we behave. So I just wonder like, how did you, did that come from within yourself? Was that, how did you, like, go to work at that time and just, like, speak your truth?

Levitt: [Simultaneously] Mm-hm, right. [Laughing] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Mm, yeah. Um, well, I think, I had done a lot — because I was in women's studies in my undergraduate, I had a lot, I knew a lot about, like, feminist theory and, um, and I remember I did a lot of projects on like, whose voices are we not hearing? And that was focused more on, like, um, Black women in particular, and that's when I got into like, Audre Lorde and other folks that were, that, you know, when I look back at — again, they—it wasn't like their language was saying trans, but it just felt like it was more of an understanding, how when you say women, they often were only talking — the white organizers were often only talking about white women. So there was something I learned from that that was like, right, the language we're using is not necessarily inclusive, so people would say women, but they didn't mean Black women at all. And so that kind of, like, understanding of that history helped me in being like, this is actually very similar to when we say “women,” but we're not being inclusive of trans women or we're saying women's services, but we're not being inclusive of the people who have the body parts that you're talking about. And so, I think it's really from like specifically Black feminist thought and theory that helped me to make that kind of connection. There was also, um, an organizer named Emi Koyama — I don't know if I'm pronouncing her name totally right, but I can find her name, that she did a lot of or—she also had trainings on trans feminism too, so I learned a little bit from her,

as a trans woman of color who was doing some un—some understanding of like, being inclusive to trans women. And I felt like I read some of that, that was helpful. I read some of like feminist thought, and then I just kind of like tapped into what are the — what were the fears that I was having? So my first relationship with a trans person before I came out as trans, I had these feelings of being like, oh, you're selling out because you wanna be a man. Like that language was in me, so I learned it, but I think it helped me to understand how to unlearn it for myself and for other people. So I was like, I was there, what was it about? It was about, like, feeling like you're gonna lose something, that our collec—our connection to the word woman, or organizing around feminism. So how do I speak to that exact fear, and also explain that this isn't new? I think that's another thing, is like people would feel like this is a new thing that trans people are coming in and trying to take away women's rights. Like that was kind of the narrative. I'm like, this is actually, we've been around forever. [Laugh] And who are the people that are suffering, or are at the extremes of discrimination when we talk about gender and race? Like it's trans people, it's specifically trans women of color, like, so if it's about that for you, like who's experiencing the most kind of discrimination within gender, it's these folks. I'm like, this is how we can be more, this kind of adds to our movement, and adds to our work. So, there's a combination of like different readings and understanding and then me myself feeling like, where do I fit in here? Here I am this like women's studies major, but feeling like the language is not inclusive. And now that I'm a healthcare provider, I find it even more powerful, because I'm able to say, okay, I come into your health center, you don't offer me a pregnancy test. You don't have a, even if that's something I should get, you have a women's health template and a men's health template. And then you don't ask me the questions you need to ask me, or I come in for an HIV test and you ask me if I have sex with men, women, or both. And I say, men, and you give me a ton of information as if I'm a cisgender man and a partner with a cisgender man and we're both trans, so you've given us no information that's relevant to our body. So how do we actually, I think in healthcare it's even stronger, because I can say like, you missed this important service for this person, or you—this patient lied to you because they felt like you weren't inclusive, or you did the wrong, like, STI test because you didn't know what body part they had. Um, so all of it kind of connects. I feel like I bring that trans feminism into healthcare provider work to be like, here are some real specific examples of why you're not providing the care you need to provide to the patient because you haven't asked the right questions and your language is so limiting. And I think some ways that helps to kind of break through to people. [Pause] That was a lot. [Laugh]

Jones-Williams: I'm—Thank you. I really enjoyed, like, listening to all of it. Do you—how are you feeling? Do you need any—a break, or anything like that?

Levitt: I feel like I should get water.

Jones-Williams: Okay. Do you want to get some water? [Laughter]

Levitt: I'm gonna get water. I'll be back.

Jones-Williams: Check what time it is. Yeah, we, if you ha—I—we still have a little more time, um, if you'd like to continue chatting. Do you want us to come back and like, I don't know. Do—how much time would be helpful to have?

Levitt: I mean, I could just take a five minute break.

Jones-Williams: Okay, perfect. Five minutes.

Levitt: Okay. Then you're going to see my, my head shot for a little while.

Jones-Williams: Okay. [Both laugh] I'll see you in five. [Pause, new recording begins] Hello.

Levitt: Did that work?

Jones-Williams: Yes.

Levitt: I don't know. I didn't do anything. [Laughing] I just pressed the button.

Jones-Williams: It's strange. I heard you when you first came back and then, I don't know, I don't know. But I hear you.

Levitt: I know nothing about technology.

Jones-Williams: You're doing pretty good. [Both laugh] Um, I was just looking over my questions. I guess something I wanted to ask was, um, so I feel like, I think I've been thinking about success a little bit. I was actually reading Audre Lorde. I've been reading more Audre Lorde and she's talking a lot about success and this obsession, the way that America is, like, obsessed with success. and also, like, disillusioned by it. And I – when I fir– when I looked you up to interview you, I was like, wow, like, you seem so prolific and you have 20 plus years experience and like, that's so wonderful because I think we should celebrate trans community. And then at the same time, I was like, he's so successful, like [both laugh]. I don't know, I guess I just found this, like, I'm curious if, like, there are ways in which you see yourself that differ than the ways that, like, the community at large maybe perceives you?

Levitt: Yeah.

Jones-Williams: Because of how successful, successful you are? And if you could just talk about your relationship to success, and.

Levitt: Yeah. Um, I mean, that's interesting. I feel like, have you heard of imposter syndrome? I feel that a lot.

Jones-Williams: [Simultaneously] Yeah.

Levitt: I talk to a lot of people about that. I don't in any way, it's like interesting to hear anyone say that I'm successful because this is not a word that I use, even though I could see, by its definition and like the work that I've done, but I really don't see that in myself at all. And I think I think a lot about it and how people, I'm – I'm very, I'm like, I think also being trans, like always thinking about how people see me, um, and I don't, I think it came up recently. So now I'm part of this nursing BC program and I'm working, uh, with someone at Hunter who has a research team, and one of the people on the research team is an old patient of mine that's no longer a patient of mine. And we have a very nice working relationship, and the person that I work with is like, oh, he really looks up to you. Like he was like a little intimidated by you because of all the work that you've done and because you were his provider., and I was like, that doesn't even make any sense to me! Like I couldn't wrap my head around it all, because I don't see myself that way, and I also think like – it doesn't discount the work I've done. I think the work that I've done is really important. And I also reflect on the fact that the time that I was doing this work, like more of the beginning of getting involved in different kinds of trans organizing, I was absolutely tokenized in these—in these ways that like it, I wasn't – I was bringing my lived experience, which I think is very important, but I didn't have a lot of the experience needed for these jobs. Now I do, [laughing] but like, in the beginning, I didn't. And I—it was like, they didn't have anyone trans. And I remember distinctly like, even the application process felt different, like once I talked – as, I've, from a—you know, as soon as I came out, I've been very openly trans, when I felt like it was safe to be. So I think everybody sort of knows me as this like, trans professional in person. Um, but there are jobs, like my first job at Callen-Lorde, at that time they didn't have, now they have tons of trans people there, but they didn't really have trans staff members, and so, even though I think I was good at my job, I got those jobs because they're like, we need a trans person. And so I think that impacts how successful I feel, because I feel like I was sort of brought in to like, fill a gap that was needed about, we need a trans person, which is important, to have someone of lived experience there. And then I gained the experience, but I wonder if it impacted how I feel like, did I deserve these jobs? Like, did I, I

didn't bring the kinds of, uh, experience that one would want in this—in these jobs. And I ended up, I think, doing them very well. And I think, you know, learning from them and building myself up in these different ways, and, um. But yeah, it's just something I've been thinking about, like, the ways in which trans folks are tokenized in different positions and sometimes set up, like, for failure because they're not given, like I have – another thing I've been reflecting on is that I never had a mentor. I never had a mentor, like, in any job I've ever had, or just in general. I've had friends and community that we've, like, been there for each other, we're discovering things together, but we were kind of on the same level. But I had never had someone that, you know, had more experience than me, that I was, that I could have a relationship with – maybe someone at a conference I saw, but that actually sat down with me and be like, here are the skills that I think are helpful for this organizing or this job, or here's some experience that's helpful, and so that's why I do a lot of that now. I feel like I help prepare trans folks for the experiences that they might have, um, in ways that—that I wasn't, that didn't happen for me. So I think I have built on a lot of these—this work, and nursing school, I think is one of the things that I'm like, okay, that, that was a lot of work and that, you know, I went into to have this goal of helping trans folks. But because I've been just moving so much, like having all these jobs, like filling all— you know, keeping myself really busy, I haven't reflected at all. Maybe that's what's great about this project too, of like, the Trans Oral History Project, because I don't sit and talk about my work and my life very often, you know? Um, so I feel like I haven't really reflected on like all the things that I have done. In the beginning, they very much were like, we need a trans person, we don't care about your experience, but where I am now, like, I have had a lot of, I have done a lot of work, and I think what I maybe define as, like, success is that I recognize where there's gaps. Like, so my first job at Callen-Lorde, which, I had no healthcare experience and I got this job to do like healthcare training. Luckily I figured it out, but I noticed that there was a gap, like there was trans folks coming in for hormones and they knew nothing about hormones, which was like my own experience, you know, with that [laughing] testosterone spray. I was like, what if we created a visit that was just a counseling and education visit for trans people, hopefully also led by trans folks when we have enough staff members, but it was just me at the time. And we just sit with them and say like, here's what to expect, because the medical providers don't have time for that, or they don't have the experience. So I think these things that I think are successful are, like, seeing where there's a gap, like at Community Healthcare Network, nobody, there's not a trans health program. What if we started that? But to me, I never thought of it at the time as successful. I was just like, what would I need as a patient? What does the community need? What can I do to help make that happen? And I experienced so many, um, barriers along the way and so many, like, really toxic work environments, that I never really reflected on doing these things well or, like, having success because I was around a lot of co-workers that weren't supportive, you know, that didn't have gratitude for the work that I – that's the big thing that's coming up for me, like, I don't do this

work to get gratitude, but I've worked with a lot of people that don't give that sort of support, mentorship, gratitude – anything, really. Um, and they're just like, you're trans, go do this trans thing. And so it's, im, really in thinking back like, yeah, those things didn't exist before, or they existed and I helped to build on them. And that is really great. And in some places they haven't continued and in some places they really have. And sometimes people don't really know the history of it at all. Like I walked into Callen-Lorde actually not too long ago because there's some people I still know there, and a ton of people just had no clue who I was, and I worked there for 9 years [both laughing] at like a really intense time of the, of the comp—the organization, where I helped, like, build, and just – no one had any clue. And I was like, you know, it's all right. Like I feel like I did the work I did, and I didn't do it to like, have a placard of myself, but it is also interesting that nobody here knows me. Um, so that's, that's, that's been interesting. So I think when people see the work that I've done, it does look really successful, but it never felt that way to me. It felt like it was like, I wanna create things I didn't have. I don't know how to do it, and I'm just figuring it out along the way. And now I'm like, those are, that is difficult for trans folks in positions that nobody gives them the support or mentorship that they need. And then they don't know if they're doing it successfully. Like, I feel like that's the thing, like, I didn't know that I was doing any of these jobs well, whatever that might mean, because I didn't have any mentor or any evaluation, really, which is a problem that was like, hey, here's where you're – you're doing great here, you need some improvement here. I was just like, let me make this up as I go along and hopefully things will work out. And I think that's why it's hard for me to even see myself as having success in the field.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, and I guess I – that word too for me is like, um, that maybe that is like not something even to work towards? Like, I guess I more meant that like, it's that like America seems really obsessed with success. And, um, siren, one sec.

Levitt: [Simultaneously] Yeah. You know, I don't hear it, weirdly.

Jones-Williams: Alright. [?] Okay, cool. Um–

Levitt: That's one thing about moving out of New York City. We don't really have a lot of sirens.

Jones-Williams: You're like, I don't hear any.

Levitt: Yeah, I can't even hear it anymore. [Both laughing]

Jones-Williams: Um. Yeah, like, just that maybe that's actually not, that's not something really to aspire to.

Levitt: Right.

Jones-Williams: And, um, a lot of what you're talking about reminds me of, like, what I've been reading in Audre Lorde's writings, and, um, kind of like marching by a drum of like, feeling and like self-guidance, because of w—a lack of resource given to you, and. [Pause] I—I wonder, yeah, if you could speak to like, I don't know, emotion or feeling, like it feels like that's maybe, could be a driver, versus success.

Levitt: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, and I think also once I'm in the nursing field, like that is a whole other discussion of like, success. Cause it's just like, the ways in which nurses are completely burnt out, and like, expected to take on the worl—like, way more than they can handle, um, is really difficult. And I think like the, the emo— that's other thing about my, the work that I've done, or the organizing that I've done, that I've been thinking about, that has been very emotion led, and that has also created a lot of difficulty in these workplaces. That's why a lot of these workplaces have been really toxic, is that like, I'm coming from this emotional place of like, I'm creating things that I never had that I want for the community that we're like, this is life or death for a lot of people. And they're just like, I'm at my nine to five and I don't care, [laughing] you know? So it's sort of like, working with, you know, people that are like, yeah, they care about the work, but it doesn't come from the same lived experience and like, need for this community and this healthcare. So they could cut a program, you know, and be like, we had to cut this program and it doesn't mean anything, and then I'm like, you just cut the program that is essential to, you know, a lot of our livelihoods. Like things like that that have happened that, it's hard. I can't imagine, I've just been doing this for so long that every job I've had has had, besides some hospital work I've done, like, has been, had a trans component to it, trans health component. I can't imagine doing any other work, but also it's incredibly emotionally draining to be doing work that is based on your own identity, and, like, fighting for access for your own community. So it is always emotion led, and that has caused a lot of problems, like I find it hard to talk to people like a boss or a supervisor that doesn't really get why this is so emotional. Or sometimes I feel like I can't talk about something without getting emotional when I'm like, emotions aren't necessarily valued in these spaces, like, you have to talk in a way that's like, you know, more logical and people can understand you, especially to funders or to board members. But it's emotional, and it's hard, and – yeah, so I think, but I, but I think you're right about this like notion of what is success that can, is, can be really challenging depending on how you define it.

Jones-Williams: Yeah. Yeah, I guess it's also maybe recognizing this like, like seeing someone like you online in America kind of wanting to, like pat themselves on the back or something,

like reminds me of like this sort of tokenizing of a trans person and also being like, we did it! Like, we accept you and wanting to congratulate themselves? Um, and, yeah, I guess I maybe already asked you this, but I was just curious if like, if you feel like there's a way that you don't, that you, that you don't feel seen, that you would like to be seen, um, or maybe, or maybe there is a space that you do feel really seen, and that's like, um, you know, a contrast.

Levitt: Mm. Yeah. I mean, I've been thinking that like a lot of these places I've worked at, not only am I fighting for trans inclusion or trans healthcare or whatever it might be, but I'm also have gotten like really inappropriate questions from coworkers, uh, who are just really curious, you know? And because I put myself out there so much, as someone who teaches about this, and I do tell personal stories and, you know, I'll share like one or two personal stories when I do a training or a workshop, cause I think it helps people connect around it? But I think that sort of makes people feel like they can ask me about my body, or about my relationship or like, just like, or words they're having trouble with. Like, you know, people will literally process with me that they're having trouble with someone's pronouns. And I'm like, why – why are you telling me about this? Like, what validation do you want me to give to you about how you're messing up on the person's pronouns who's trans, and you should just get it together? And so I think that that is something I've just become accustomed to. So I'm – I'm often, as much as I try to be, like, charming and connect with people and teach people and be like, okay, well, you're gonna ask me these questions, I'd rather take it on than this other person who maybe can't, you know, who this would be more traumatizing for. But then I can't be my full authentic self at, at these workplaces where I'm kind of constantly on guard. Like at some point I'm gonna get some inappropriate question. So I feel like I can't, you know, totally relax, you know, or just like, take a breath, and not—and feel like a connection, and feel like I can take a break from this constant teaching about trans things, you know, trans-related. Even if it's like a very well-intentioned person who just wants to tell me about their random trans cousin and ask me if I know them, that literally happens to me all the time. And it'll be like someone in California, and I'll start to say like, oh, we don't all know each other. And then sometimes I do know that person, and I don't wanna say it, like, [interviewer laughs] I don't want you to just ask a trans person if they know another trans person even though we do know each other. So I think those moments, those—that's like most of my workplaces, is that experience. So when I do feel like I can have this joy or like be myself is usually in, I mean, I think it's like trans spaces also of a certain age, too. I mean, I certainly feel comfortable and great in all ages, but I just think there's a way in which there's a way we can kind of connect when we've been through similar experiences, and, like, there's different health centers that I'm researching about now in my PhD program that are by and for trans folks, and what that experience is like, it's like you can, in some ways I think in the body ways, like I have all this shoulder and back pain, part of aging, but also part of just being on edge all the time, and like, it's like up here all the time. So I think of it

as like the place when I can put my shoulders down and like, just kind of breathe, like take deeper breaths as opposed to really shallow breaths, which is I'm learning now is, like, how I've been breathing, like constantly getting ready for the next inappropriate question or uncomfortable moment. So in the times where I can just like let my shoulders down and take deep breaths, they're rare places. I mean, with my family, with my friends, with some family members, not all, and with, you know, in Fire Island or in a like trans or queer space, or with like really great allies that I feel like have really, they kinda—they get it, you know? Some of the organizing now that I'm doing, like I'm doing a lot of Jewish anti-Zionist organizing for Palestine, which has been amazing. And those are spaces, even if they're not trans specific spaces, I feel like people just get it. Like they've made the connections, or anti-racist organizing or like Black Lives Matter stuff, like where people already are thinking about all these forms of oppression. And those are places that I feel like I can be myself because they're not gonna have, usually, not gonna have a bad reaction to finding out I'm trans or, um, that's been interesting to organize in worlds that are not—that don't know me as trans? Most of my organizing world is like, everyone knows who I am, but doing this different kind of organizing where people don't know me, now there's like a new feeling I have, which I, which is very new for me, which is, oh, they don't know I'm trans. Like, I'm just walking into a space where people are like, this isn't Nathan the trans person. Everyone knows me in New York City, in these, in these specific circles as trans, and so it's just been a new experience. of organizing with people that don't necessarily know this about me. But then I'm like, when will it come up, and should I talk about it right away? [Laughing] So that's a very new experience for me. I haven't felt it since – well, I guess, yeah, I haven't—I don't know when I felt it, because when I started, like before I was passing, and I was more non-binarily, genderqueer-identified, I never, people just called me “she” all the time. And then I started looking like this and passing more, but I was very outwardly, you know, out about being trans in everything I did, so everyone knew, and so now I'm in this new organizing world that they don't necessarily know. There are moments where it's nice. We don't have to talk about it. And then there are other moments of anxiety, of like, this is gonna, someone just assumed that I'm like a cis man and I don't want to be put into that world ever.

Jones-Williams: Yeah. I don't want to erase like where I've, everything I've gone through.

Levitt: Yeah, right. And like be a part, I don't know, it's happened sometimes. Like there are moments where, you know, we all come out and we, if we feel safe or not. So there's some moments where I don't feel safe to talk about it, and I've been like grouped into this, this male world. And it is, it does erase who I am. And it does, there's a part of it that's like, a little easy for a minute, right? But then the next minute is like, oh God, there's gonna be something uncomfortable that's said where we have a shared experience of growing up socialized as men,

or you're gonna talk about your penis or something, and, like, assume that I have the same. So I just think, that's gonna be uncomfortable. So then my shoulders go back up, you know?

Jones-Williams: Mm-hm. [Pause] I would love to hear you talk a little bit more about your, like, specifically, like your experience of being Jewish and your anti-Zionist organizing, if that's something you wanna talk about. Um, it's come up like a couple times, I feel like, like in this conversation, but we haven't really given it much space. Yeah, I would love to hear a little bit more.

Levitt: Yeah. So, I mean, I was, when I first moved to New York, actually the first friends I met were part of an organization that doesn't exist anymore. It's called, um, Jews Against the Occupation, or JADO. There's still a lot of people from the JADO world that are now a part of Jewish Voice for Peace, which people know a little bit more about. But when I first moved to New York, that's like the people I, like, Jewish organizing, where it felt really beautiful because it was like organizing around the things about Judaism that we love, like the holidays, the commitment to social justice, the - like, there's just really great things about Judaism that I really love and we connect, and we really connected about it. And then speaking out against, um, the treatment of Palestinians and just Zionism in general, like I was raised somewhat Zionist. My family is having a very hard time in this particular moment, it's caused a lot of divisions in the family. But I did a program – when I was in Boston, I met someone who ran this program called Birthright Unplugged, which is a program that takes mostly American Jews to areas of Palestine to show us the things we didn't learn about. Like when I went to Hebrew school, you know, all I learned about was Israel and I never learned about Palestinians. Like it was just as if they didn't exist. And so, I started to learn more about that, and then this program just brought us to actually see people and meet people and like see what the actual experience was like. And I'll never forget, I came back to my family, I had a PowerPoint presentation, I had like pictures of what is it like? And they just couldn't hear it. Like I think the, and this is, obviously we could talk about this for a long time, but just sort of the brainwashing and indoctrination specifically of Jewish folks around this, around this conflict and around this region, so, that was another way that I was like pushed away from my family. Cause I was like, not only am I trans and queer and you don't get that, but also I'm anti-Zionist and I'm supporting, you know, Palestinians and speaking out against injustice, and, um, you don't get that either. So it's now, you know, given everything that's happening right now and the current events, like it's come back, and I've been really involved in Jewish Voice for Peace, which I think is really extraordinary organization that histor—that understands the history of all these different movements? So I was a part of two big actions, one was at Grand Central, um, where it was an action that was based on a historical action of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power). I thought it was so amazing that ACT UP had done this, like, action in Grand Central just

raising awareness around AIDS and HIV and funding for it, and they dropped banners, and so Jewish Voice for Peace is basically the same thing, but about Palestine and speaking out against, you know, the killing of Palestinians and everything that's happening right now. And it felt so beautiful to be a part of it. Primarily Jewish, although it was also like multiracial, and different people of different religious backgrounds, standing up and saying like, this is not okay. This is not in our, you know, not in our name, not with our money from the US, like funding it. And it is, it's interesting. It's like very queer, but it wasn't called to be queer, which is another thing that like, kind of brings my whole life together. It's like, yeah, the people that usually get all of these different things are usually queer. [Laughing] Like we, we already have a step outside of this, kind of like, this, heteronormative world, so we're already – not all of us for sure, but many of us are already seeing these connections? So I remember at Grand Central looking around and being like, oh, we all, the organizing was amazing. It was just like different groups only knew certain things. So then we were flooding Grand Central with our, you know, Jews for Ceasefire and “not in our name” shirts. But I look around and I was like, this is all queer. Like all of us that are in Grand Central right now are some kind of queer, even though this wasn't a, it's not a queer organization. It just so happens that the people that are doing this organizing are also queer. And that made a lot of sense to me. So it was really beautiful, and just yesterday I was a part of a, we shut down the Manhattan Bridge and it was a-mazing. And it was a, there was a family component. So this is really beautiful too, where I can bring my child, like, and my partner and I and a bunch of families with their kids in a safe part of the Manhattan Bridge, not sitting on the street, but being a part of the family's part with a security team that was devoted just to the families. And everyone brought, like, kid snacks and all these different, you know, things, of chants and chalk and coloring pages. So you had that part and then you had the folks that were like willing to get arrested and were sitting on the actual bridge and, um, dropping banners and everything. And it's been, it's like re-inspired me again. Like I did this organizing back in 2000, and now I feel like it's connecting us back to each other, and it's like a little reunion? So these people that started Jews Against Occupation in, 20 years ago are the same people that are now kind of involved in this, but here we are, like some of us with kids, some of us, you know, in different relationships and everything. So it's been emotional. It's been really, really emotional. It's been really inspiring. It's also, like, so clearly connected to other movements, like ol-, like older folks that were a part of civil rights movements are also part of Jewish Voice for Peace and other organizing around the country, and to see all these people in other parts of the country doing it, and also to see people I know? Like, I'm not used to the news being people I know, you know, organizing. Like this is getting on the news and it's getting in the media, and I'll be like, that's my best friend, you know, up there in the, on the New York Times! And, um, I just, right, it's interesting that interview's happening now because I'm feeling so inspired by yesterday's action, so it's really amazing. And it feels like this really inclusive space, because it's so queer that we kind of get all of these things, that we can stand up against

injustice and say, we just also happen to be queer, and a lot of trans folks, and it has caused a lot of – I'm currently in a difficult relationship with my brother around this. Like he's just having a really hard time with it, and I write novels in emails, which is not the best use of my time – I have like two jobs, I'm in school, and I have a child, and I'm spending hours writing emails to my brother, which is tough. But yeah, it's caused some family dynamics, which is, um, difficult, but I just feel really, really inspired and privileged to be a part of this organizing, which I think is really making a difference. And I think connects me back to this organizing that I used to do. Being a parent and moving to Stanford, I've been like a little disconnected from some of the organizing, so it's kind of brought me back in.

Jones-Williams: Wow. Yeah, I saw that action, um. And yeah, it's just, it's so inspiring.

Levitt: Yeah, It's pretty amazing.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, it's pretty amazing. Yeah. How was your, um, how was your child's response to the action? How did they experience it?

Levitt: It's been, it's been really, really tough to – I mean, I think there's so many grownups that don't understand this, so it's like, to try to explain it to a six year old.

Jones-Williams: Yeah.

Levitt: And in particular, the part about being Jewish, like I, I want, she's raised in a household, like my partner's not Jewish, but like may as well be, [both laughing] because he just grew up in Brooklyn around all the Jews and he knows more about Judaism than I do sometimes. But we celebrate Christmas and Hanukkah, like we celebrate a lot of different holidays. And I want her to have this pride in being Jewish like I do, but it's a really difficult time to have that pride, because there are so many Jewish people that don't understand this. And in, in particular, in my own family, who aren't standing up against this, who are like, justifying and standing with Israel in a way that is very destructive and seems to have no analysis or awareness of anything. And so she'll ask, I mean, six year olds, they can ask some questions where you're like, damn, that's a – that's like a therapy question. It's like, I'm gonna need some time – but she, I was trying to describe to her, it's more like we use a language around, like, fairness and justice. Like we don't get into the real specifics, but like we stand up for fairness, we stand up for justice, we don't want people to be killed, like, we don't want to steal land from people, like, we just kind of talk about it like that. But then I sort of also had to explain, why are we wearing shirts that say like, “not in my name” or Jews against Israel, which is complicated to explain. And so, I was sort of explaining how some Jewish people feel like the state of Israel, and they can't understand or

comprehend anything that could be negative about Israel. And so she sits with it for a while and then she's like, well, some Jewish people are doing these bad things or not nice things, then why are we Jewish? And I was like, oh God, that's intense, because I have my own shame, right? About like Jewish people at this time, because I feel like really angry at a lot of Jewish people in my family, or in community. So how do I explain to her these, like, nuances of all of this? And so, it's been a little tough, um, but she has some good friends in, in New York City and in Brooklyn who are also part of like, organizing families, and their parents are getting arrested at these, these actions, and so she has friends to talk to, but they're more there, not so much here. Like, it's been interesting to say, I don't know if you can talk about this in school. Like, I don't know if you can tell, like they'll be like, what did you do this weekend? I mean, it could happen today. I thought about it just when I took her to the bus, like, they're gonna say, what did you do over your Thanksgiving weekend? And she's gonna be excited to share that she went to this action, and she likes to chant, like, free Palestine! But I'm like, I don't know how your school is gonna react to that, or other students and other kids in the school. So yeah, I have a lot of thoughts about this because I'm still trying to figure it out. Like, how do you talk to a kid about it in a way that they understand? Because of course she's like, why would anyone wanna kill children, right? Like what, like to wrap your mind around that as a six-year-old, and we talked to her a lot about, like, police brutality too, I mean, she's also like, an interracial kid, and she's gonna, her experience in the world is gonna be very different, but then she got really scared of the police, which is understandable, but then I'm like, maybe as a six-year-old, you can't really – I don't have these thoughts well worked out, because I'm still trying to figure out how does a kid, like child development is so interesting. Like, how do you explain this? And she's already also dealing with having, not dealing with, but like, her family structure is different than the kids she goes to school with, and we have had this conversation. It's kind of related, just about what you can talk about in privacy and public about, she's really proud that her dad carried her, right? That she, like, her dad gave birth to her, right? But like, there's a lot of kids that are not gonna get that, [both laughing] um, and that she has two dads in general, some people don't totally get, you know. People will ask her, why don't you have a mom? And she did tell a kid on the playground once that, they asked—said something about, why don't you have a mom? And, and she said, oh, I have two dads and my dad gave birth to me. And they were, the kid was like, nope. The—the kid was like, you're wrong. Like, that's not possible, so you're wrong. So then we had to kind of have a conversation like, we're very proud of this as a family, but unfortunately, like, not everybody gets it, and some things we can't always – which felt heartbreaking to have that conversation. Cause I'm like, I want you to go out into the world and be proud of your family and not have to feel shame. So it does connect to also this, you know, Palestine organizing, cause it feels like, I want her to be proud of this, but I also want her to be safe, and, you know, there's space—some spaces where you can't talk, or you should be able to talk about it, but it could be dangerous to talk about.

Jones-Williams: Yeah. [Pause] Either way, it sounds like generative territory for her to be raised in and around. And like, maybe sh—, and definitely she'll have these memories and like, maybe it'll, over time, like it'll sink in as she ages, and — do you find like, I don't know, hearing you talk, I was like, are there like storybooks, like bedtime storybooks that you feel like you turn to, or are you like, we have to just like, create our own stories or like, I don't know.

Levitt: Yeah. I mean, that's a great question. We think about this a lot with like, family structures, like — it all connects, but like, thinking about books, like we got a lot of these books and posters and they're like, Black is beautiful, like books that focus more on Black kids, cause I grew up with like all books about white kids. And then one day she's like, why are all my books about Black people? Why are there no white people in my books? And I was like, I hadn't considered that she doesn't know, she hasn't had the experience enough to know of like, racism, and how it's worked, so that she doesn't understand why is she getting all these books that are about Black people, but it kind of connects to like, then we're now, we have a, we're trying to get books that show more different family structures. And there's not a lot, like even, there's a few, there's certainly not any that I know of that are about a trans man giving birth to a kid, who's in a relationship with another trans man. Like I haven't found that book yet. I guess maybe we have to write it. But so all of the books are very much, you know, about a mom and a dad, or, like, maybe they'll have somewhat different family structures. Maybe they'll have two dads or two moms, but definitely they're not trans. So finding books or, like, reading books and saying, okay, our family is a little different, like we're trying to have those conversations. And then I just or—I just ordered a bunch of books about Palestine, cause I think part of this is the way in which this, Palestinians in particular have been dehumanized, it's like, we don't hear their stories. Even just like, a simple kid's story, like not necessarily a story that's like, let me tell you about the conflict, but just like, here's a story about a Palestinian kid. Like I never, I never learned that. I didn't even know that they existed, so I think that's something I've been doing, is ordering books about Palestinian children and families, just, that don't necessarily go into the whole conflict in history, but just show people as real people. So that's, um, that's something I've been doing. And I just think like, what are the things that I wasn't exposed to, or I had to learn later, or I had to unlearn. Like I'm trying to do, like, as much things that — we're both, my partner and I are trying to do as much things as we can to, that she doesn't have to unlearn a lot of things? But she still goes to school, and she still watches TV, you know, so it's going to be there. But I do think like you were saying, those memories are gonna, like, she didn't totally understand the action, but, um, she had a good time, you know? She's like, writing in chalk and hearing chants and being in community around it, and I think that that is something that will stick with her.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, I think so.

Livett: Let's hope. [Laugh]

Jones-Williams: I think you should, we should write this book. [Both laughing] About two trans dads. It sounds like a really good book.

Levitt: [Simultaneously] Yeah, I don't really—yeah, I think it's gonna be a good book. There's some books about gender that are pretty good, but I have yet to find specifically a book about a trans dad being pregnant. Like that's a very specific book.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, I know. If I come across it, I will definitely, I will definitely let you know.

Levitt: [Simultaneously] Yeah, let me know! Like it connects to the things we've been talking about, like seeing yourself represented, it's a big deal. Like even though she feels loved in this family, and like, she knows she's well loved, she has other kids that don't have the same family structure, she's got books that don't really talk about it. So it's tough, but I think connecting with, it's also impacts, like where we wanna live. Like do we wanna stay here or do we wanna go, I mean, these are like life decisions I need to make, but, do we wanna go to places where they—she's gonna see more people like our family? It's just that those places are usually the most unaffordable places to live. [Laughing] Like New York City and San Francisco, which, certainly people exist elsewhere, but it just feels like, how do you also have a good quality of life, and have your kid and yourself be around community, and feel like you're represented? It's not easy.

Jones-Williams: No, yeah, you bring, you raised, like, a lot of really good points. One other thing I wanted to ask you, and then like, we can slowly find our way into closing, um – is like about, I have this friend who really believes in like queer representation in, like, rural America, like they just really feel like – it's really important to them because they grew up in a rural place and didn't have that., and so have made this life choice to live somewhere rural, im, and come up against a lot of challenges, but for them, they just feel like it's really important because maybe there's, there's a kid out there that, like, really needs to see that flag. [Laugh]

Levitt: Totally.

Jones-Williams: And, if that had been there when they were a kid, it would have meant everything to them. And like, I don't know, I also have been thinking, it's been making me think about that, and hearing about this move to Stanford, and not that like Stanford is like, America

is a very big country and like, yeah, there's a lot of probably scarier places to be in, but, I guess, yeah, like I wonder, um, or I think about your, your child going into school and maybe like, maybe there'll be a process of unlearning, but maybe she'll also be able to like teach, have these like, little ways in which she teaches other kids and like, I wonder if you have any experience, like positive experiences living in a somewhat more rural place and seeing it making an impact in a place that doesn't have that much visibility around you.

Levit. Yeah, I mean, I think that [pause] there's a way in which we, as in my partner and I are like, we're having a better quality of life that's impacting our ability to be, to – to have self care, and to be good parents? Like we're just running around so much in New York City and like, on the subways forever, and on top of people, and just, it was a lot like – and I love it there and I go back and visit, and there are times I think about living there again, but I just feel like having the space and quiet and calm is so important. And that, so, I think it has impacted us to be able to like reflect, you know, I feel like there's like this constant moving, moving, moving in New York. Like I actually still, I still do it here. I walk really fast, and I'm in no rush, and all these people around me are like, what's wrong with you? Like literally I had a random stranger be like, slow down. [Laughing] Like, I just – cause it's like how you walk in New York, whether you're in a rush or not, you're just like, navigating around people and, you're—you're not doing that. So it's like allowed me to slow down, and I think that's been really important, especially as someone who's like, getting older, and I haven't slowed down with all my jobs, I still have too many jobs, but I think slowing down just in life and having an easier time has really impacted me and my partner as like trans people that have had not easy times in life. And now we're just able to like – we got an inflatable hot tub, you know? We have a backyard, like we have a little, we can make a fire outside! There are little things that just are quite nice. So that's been really great. In fact, all our New York City friends come to visit cause they're like, this is like an Airbnb vacation experience where they have room, they have their own bed. I feel like New York City people are so used to sleeping on people's couches, you know? So it's sort of like, people have space and, and this – Stanford has a mix of, it is an urban city, like there is a pretty big city here, and there is like a country area and a suburban area, so it's a combination of all of those things. I do think that, like I was saying about the neighbors and how they bake us cookies and take care of our dogs, and there's a genuine, like a way in which people do look out for each other in these neighborhoods that I didn't have as much, although some areas of Brooklyn have that too. But people just are like, hey, we've been here for years and we're gonna help take care of each other. So, I do like that. You lose a little bit of community in some of the politics, but you gain some other things that don't really exist there, and also the one or two people I do meet, I connect with in a way that in New York City, I wouldn't. Like I met a queer person, I'm like, we're gonna be friends, let's get each other's numbers. I'm not gonna do that in New York City. And like – we're all, you know, there's so many of us, but it's like a genuinely sweet relationship.

Also, there's a lot of people from Brooklyn here, like a ton of people from Brooklyn moved here. So that's interesting too, like, connecting with people that are from the same area.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, I wouldn't, I, I mean, I don't know. I guess I wouldn't know.

Levitt: Nobody knows anything about St–yeah, no, people don't know about Stanford, it's like a little-known secret. And there's a queer healthcare center, and there's a gay bar. I mean, there's one, but it's still like, kind of cute because the gay bar here is such a mix. Like it's everybody, because you have one. So it's like, everybody comes, different ages, races, like, uh, you know, all different kinds of people where I feel like in New York City, you have your bars for different things. And there's so many of them. So there's things I appreciate about it, and the fact that we can so easily get back and forth to New York City is really important.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, that sounds really nice.

Levitt: Yeah, it's not bad.

Jones-Williams: Yeah. [Both laugh] Is there, yeah, is there anything else that has, has anything come to mind that you wanted, that you would like to talk about that we haven't, that we haven't talked about?

Levitt: We've talked about a lot of stuff. I can't think of anything we haven't talked about – probably I'll think of something when we're not talking anymore or something I forgot to say, but I feel like we covered a lot.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, we did cover a lot, I– somehow you answered, like, all of my questions.

Levitt: It's like I knew about them beforehand, but I didn't.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, that's how I felt. I was like, oh, yep, there we go. And like, and you did it in such a nice, like, nuanced way, um, without even being prompted, so – but yeah, I guess I can see if there's like anything else that – I guess there was one, there was one moment you were talking about being in New York City and like, going in, like, where you were at the nursing school and it wasn't like always the easiest environment for you to be at, but you were also going to like, it sounded like, underground trans parties or like, you were finding yourself in spaces that were like, yeah, like some social spaces that you were finding yourself in. Does that ring a bell?

Levitt: Yeah, it was an interesting time to be in these two completely different worlds: of nursing, which was super conservative and I was the only trans person and it was quite transphobic, and then, like, the Brooklyn queer trans scene of just, like – when I could, because I was also in nursing school, so I had to, like, study, but actual, like, queer/trans dance parties, and a lot of places that don't even exist anymore, but like it would be really cool because it's like, your friends are the DJs and it's like all of the community together. And I think that it was a time before I was the community's healthcare provider, that was very different, and it just, I didn't have to navigate those relations, like, I could just have a great time and, um, and it was really fun. Like I just, I'm very thankful for that time, or those pockets, of like queer trans parties – we had more house parties then. I mean, there were, there were clubs too, but like there were actual house parties, I haven't been to a house party in so long – where we just, you know, hang out with each other in people's houses, and connect, and meet people, and it was an exciting time of like, coming into a trans space that was more radical, and was also having fun! Like, you know, we also knew we were going through hard times, but we were, like, dancing off, you know, and really connected with each other, um, when we could. And that did change a lot when I, when I started working more in the community. And it didn't mean I couldn't be a part of these spaces, like I still went to things, but, it's just that that relationship changed. But yeah, it was a really interesting time to be in this nursing world and in this queer trans party world. They did not come together at all.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, do you remember, like, any of the names of the spaces that you were in, or, like, how you like, found each other, if it was a house party ,or any like memories from those times?

Levitt: There was a, I just talked about this place, but it's actually where my partner and I first got together. But there was, there was a, uh, a club, it doesn't exist anymore, it's called The Hole, and it was in Lower East Side. And it's where The Cock is now, which is ironic, or funny, or whatever the word is, for the fact that The Cock literally moved into the place where The Hole was. But so that's like, I think it's Second Avenue and Second Street. The Lower East Side, it was like this dirty, like really nasty club. Like it was disgusting, like everything was sticky. It was disgusting, but it was super queer. [Laughing] Like where everybody went, they one night had \$10, all you could drink. Which makes no sense, I don't know how they made any money, but for \$10, on like a Thursday night or something, you could just drink all night for \$10. It was, it was dangerous, but it was very, very queer. And I think it was when I first learned like what queer really was. Like, I feel like I identified as queer, but I hadn't seen it in a space. And it was just super, super queer, and like trans folks, or queer folks who weren't trans, but just also very messy, because they were so drunk, but just like a really wonderful place to connect with each other and see people, and it was one of those places, once you walked, you at least knew one

person there and you just, it was easy to just get involved in different groups of people, and it was great. There was also another place in Brooklyn that we always made fun of, but now I'm like, I wish that place still existed. And now I'm totally forgetting, it was like, South Park Slope, it's not there anymore. And it's, it'll come to me, not in the moment, but it will come to me, or I'll ask someone else who has been there. And it was also another queer space that was really cool, um. Really like just, very open and accepting, and it was like, it felt like, really great to be queer in that kind of space. Also it had two floors with different dance parties. So you just meet people and then, um, I cannot believe that I can't remember the name of this. I'm going to have to do homework and get back to you on the name of it, because it's going to bother me.

[Laughing]

Jones-Williams: You can totally get back to me.

Levitt: I will, now I'm really curious, and I want to do this [?]

Jones-Williams: [Simultaneously] I'll have to edit the transcript. We'll be like, remember this.

Levitt: There were spaces like that, there were spaces like that, that existed, um. And then just random Brooklyn house parties where you feel like you knew someone who knew someone, and I'm sure those things still exist, I'm just not plugged into them anymore. But it was just a really nice way, people really were, like, appreciative of that space, too. And really, like, connected to each other. And it's interesting how those spaces changed when I became a healthcare provider because, then, I'll never forget, I went back to some of those parties and I would be asked like, can you get me an appointment at Callen-Lorde? You know, it'd be like, I'm drinking, or I'm just, like, having a fun time. But people saw me as access to a difficult system that's hard to get into. And so I'd get like, I still literally have people be like, I have this rash, can I just show it to you? It's like, at a party. And I was at like Reese Beach, which I think, I mean, that's its own wonderful, that was a wonderful space. That's also where I connected with people in parties is like being at Reese, this, like, just dirty area of the beach where all the queer and trans people went. And it was just beautiful and amazing, pre being a healthcare provider, and then post being a healthcare provider, I would literally get people showing me their rashes on the beach, and be like, can you get me an ointment for this? [Laughing] Like, can you get me into this, you know, can you get me a date for surgery, when I was working in surgery. So, those spaces were amazing, but became very different when I was, like, some – which I was like, this is why I went into this work, so I could help people get those services. But also I want to be able to like, just relax on a beach or at a party and not be asked about an appointment.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, totally.

Levitt: Or a rash. There was always a rash and I was like, I don't want to see that.

Jones-Williams: You'd had a very unique position, it sounds like.

Levitt: Yeah, yeah. Totally.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, thank you for like, remembering. It's just, that was like one thing that I was like, oh, that's, I was like, really curious about that. Yeah. About that Hole or that, the Hole, literally, but like that.

Levitt: The Hole was amazing. And also, when I was talking earlier about how our surgeries weren't covered by insurance, that was another place we met people, is we'd, everyone had these fundraising parties. I mean, certainly some people just absolutely could not afford it, it was, I mean, these surgeries were thousands of dollars, so it wasn't accessible to everyone, but it would be like a little trans fundraising party every weekend, so that was another way that we supported each other, and also met each other, in helping each other get surgery. And it was all so so beautiful because it's like, we didn't have money and we were raising money for our own surgeries, but we would still give things. I remember we, I helped do a party, actually, for my partner's chest surgery, where it was like, um, what is it called when you have, it's just like people brought things, like a Skillshare kind of thing?

Jones-Williams: Resource share?

Levitt: Yeah, it was like, people would be like, here, if for \$20, I'll do like, let's say I lead meditation services or yoga or something, or, um if you pay \$30 – you know, everyone had these different skills. And so they would just kind of put, at the party, like what skill they could offer and people would put how much money they would pay for it, and that would, and then that person would give that money, fundraised for the surgery, so it was a beautiful time of learning how we can take care of each other in systems that were creating all these barriers. Like we had, couldn't get surgeries. No one would take insurance. We just had to have literally, like, cash for – like a lot of cash, a lot of money. So some people it didn't work for, but it also was a way that we connected with each other and we're like, what skills or experiences do we have? Like someone could, you know, cook really well and be like, I'll cook you dinner tonight if you donate like \$50 to this, whatever. So that was a beautiful space where people met each other and connected and also supported each other.

Jones-Williams: Mm. Yeah, that sounds really beautiful.

Levitt: Yeah.

Jones-Williams: And like, unique to the time. And I don't know why I'm also forgetting it, but like a swap or like a—

Levitt: Yeah, that was the word! I think like a swap. Or—

Jones-Williams: Yeah.

Levitt: I don't know, cause you pay for it! We'll remember this word at some point. [Both laughing]

Jones-Williams: I think because we've been talking for three hours, my brain is like—

Levitt: Yeah, like, I don't have any words anymore. Also, it's so dark outside.

Jones-Williams: Yeah, I know.

Levitt: That's what also seems like we've been talking for days, cause now it looks like a whole other day.

Jones-Williams: [Simultaneously] The sun has like, complete—the sun, like, set on your face.

Levitt: Yeah, I know. I had to put a different light on because you wouldn't be able to see me anymore.

Jones-Williams: Yeah. It was really beautiful, though.