**NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**CHAYA/ZOE BELINSKY**

**Interviewer:** Kate Doyle Griffiths

**Date:** January 5, 2020

**Location of Interview:** Brooklyn, NY

**Transcribed by** Khonner Damon

**NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #190**

Kate Doyle Griffiths: This is Kate Doyle Griffiths, and I'm having a conversation with Chaya/Zoe Belinsky 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's January 5th, 2020, and it's being recorded at 129 Pacific Street. So, we can talk about anything that you want in any order you want, but if you just want to start, you can tell me your name, your age, any of your identifying characteristics that you want to be included, when and where you were born.

Chaya/Zoe Belinsky: Sure. So, my name is Chaya. I also go by Zoe. They mean the same thing in Hebrew and Greek, respectively. They both mean life. I use any pronouns but he. I was born in Meadowbrook, PA, which is outside of Philadelphia, and I grew up in Warminster, which is a suburb of Philadelphia. And I did my undergrad in D.C. at American University, and then I came back to Philadelphia for my Ph.D. program in philosophy at Villanova University.

Doyle Griffiths: Cool.

Belinsky: Yeah. Some identifying features of me. I am a transgender woman. I'm pretty female-identified, but I also embrace and recognize the liminality of trans women's embodiment in particular, and so I am comfortable understanding myself as bigender or having some sort of ambiguous gender performance or identity. I consider myself to have multiple sexualities that revolve around my multiple genders, so I sort of see myself as vaguely bisexual. As someone who is, when I'm attracted to men, insofar as I partially identify with being something like a man at times, it's gay. When I'm attracted to women, insofar as I'm very strongly identified as a woman, it's gay then. So I consider bisexuality to be kind of having multiple sexualities reflecting multiple gender positions in that sense. And let's see what else. I'm white, Jewish, Jew by choice. I was raised in a Catholic family, and I converted to Judaism. I began my conversion in 2010, so about 10 years ago, and I'm finally finalizing that process on May 26th of this year. So I will be officially converted at that point.

Doyle Griffiths: Wow, congratulations.

Belinsky: Thank you. Thank you.
Doyle Griffiths: Do you want to tell me maybe the first time you ever heard the word trans or some concept of that idea?

Belinsky: I remember I had a conversation with my psychology teacher in high school. I was taking a course on psychology as an elective. And I know I had heard the term before, but I remember this conversation about he used the word transsexual. And I explained to him that to me, despite still identifying as cis and straight and as a boy at the time, going to an all-boys Catholic high school, you know, I had a conversation with him in private where I said, I think that transsexuality puts too much emphasis for people like us on the sexuality part of it. And really

it's about the gender that's more important. And so I encouraged him to use the word transgender as opposed to transsexual. And he was really receptive to that and he really heard that. But that was like the first conversation I had about trans identity. And it was from this kind of misguided place of like transsexuality is an outdated term and we shouldn't use it anymore. But to me, it seemed that it emphasized that it's somehow about sex. In high school, I was thinking, you know, I don't think it's a sex thing. I think it's something else, you know, and I wanted to use language that reflected that. And so I had that conversation with him and it went well. And that's probably my first memory of really discussing trans issues.

Doyle Griffiths: So you said you grew up Catholic. What else about your family background and childhood would you want to talk about?

Belinsky: I come from a very large family, a very large Catholic, Polish, Irish family. You know, my last name is Belinsky and there's all this speculation that a number of things could have happened that gave us the name Belinsky. We spell it with a Y. And there's speculation that we changed it to a Y at Ellis Island because the Jewish community at the time, the Y is the Jewish spelling. And the Jewish community was more immigrant community, was more established and had more support for each other than the Polish, Eastern European immigrant community, which came later. And so there's this idea that we sort of pretended to be Jews in order to get jobs, essentially, which is a really counterintuitive idea. There's also this notion that we were originally Jewish and that we converted to Catholicism at some point along the line. Now, my cousin was doing some genealogical history of our family and discovered that the name Belinsky sort of came out of nowhere. And before that, we had a different last name and she found like a family with the same first name for the father, same first name for the mother, same first name for all the children, but they had a different last name. And so we were sort of speculating as to why we played fast and loose with our family history. We had no real written history. We had no, except on the Irish side, we had documents of like what, you know, Irish, I don't know what the term for it is, but, you know, everyone claims to be descended from an Irish king, [Laughter] and that's probably somewhat accurate on my Irish side. But on the Polish side, we had no real history that we could point to that was written. And so it was speculated that we had an oral history of some kind, and that because we played fast and loose with our name and sort of materialized as the Belinskys without going through Ellis Island, like in Pennsylvania specifically, we sort of just show up on the record at some point. And so it's speculated that our family might have been like Romani people at some point because we were mobile, we did not have a written history, and that we sort of came out of nowhere with this last name Belinsky. So that's just like the three competing theories as to where my last name comes from. I will say that I come from a very large family. My dad is one of 12, and all their names start with M-A-R. So that was a choice that my grandmother made. It's something like Margot, Mark, Mary, Marsha, Marianne, Marita, Maris, Marcel, Marlon, Martin. I got 10 there. [Laughter] I don't think I can do all 12. I know who they are, but I can't just list them off because there's so many. And my

mom is one of six, and her last name was Wagner, so her family was, I guess, her father was German, of German heritage. But we have mostly Polish and Irish ancestry.

Doyle Griffiths: And who lived in your house when you were growing up?

Belinsky: It was me, my mom, my dad, my sister, and occasionally my grandmother. My grandmother would rotate like four months with one family, four months with another family, and four months with a third family. And now it's down to two, so she spent six months with each of those families. And so she was in and out of my life in that sense. So it was a pretty nuclear family, all things considered.

Doyle Griffiths: How would you talk about your class background originally?

Belinsky: I come from a place of wealth. My parents, my whole family was pretty upwardly mobile. We have 12 aunts and uncles, so we have people from all different walks of life and all different states of employment. Some people involved in more manual labor, carpentry, home repair, home upkeep, things like that. We also have people who got involved in law enforcement. My uncle is a cop, my other uncle is a TSA agent. And then you have people like my dad who went on to get his PhD in molecular biology. And he works in cancer research, or he did before he retired. My mother was not wealthy for most of her life, but then landed a job with the government in the Treasury Department. And she actually worked her way up to being the head of the Philadelphia office. So there are three offices of the Treasury on the East Coast, one in D.C., one in Philadelphia, and one in Georgia or something like that. And she's the head of the Philadelphia office, or was, before she retired. And so all the Social Security checks that went out on the East Coast had her signature on it. So that's my family's class background.

Doyle Griffiths: What about New York? What's your relationship to the city of New York?

Belinsky: My relation to it is it's big and scary. It is not like Philadelphia, where I feel very at home and very able to navigate it. It sort of feels like four different cities pretending to be one city at times. And I do find it very overwhelming. I have historically had a lot of friends up here, but have not visited much until I got this job as a Hebrew school teacher at Union Temple in Brooklyn. Oh, cool. Tell me about your job a little bit. So I teach sixth grade students. Right now our curriculum is largely focused on Jewish diversity, so especially non-white Jews, Jews around the world, Jews of color, Jews in Africa especially. And the students seem to be really into this. It's making them appreciate being an American Jew more, appreciate what they have and what they don't have, and connect more to the idea of Judaism as a global religion and as a set of communities that are all very far apart but also very intimate and close within themselves. And we're changing the curriculum to be less about Hebrew text study and more about Hebrew through movement, which is this Jewish curriculum about teaching Hebrew through movement and commands and like Simon Says type games and giving people a more interactive approach to Hebrew. And I remember I was reading the Soviet psychologist Vygotsky, Vladimir, I think it's Vladimir Vygotsky. And I just love his work. He was one of the first, I think he was the first

first person to advocate for inclusive education for deaf, mute, and developmentally disabled children to educate them alongside their able-bodied and neurotypical peers rather than segregate the education. So I thought that was really cool. And we were talking about our philosophy for teaching Hebrew and we're like, we're teaching language backwards, right? Like we're teaching decoding, we're teaching the alphabet, we're teaching, or the aleph bet in Hebrew, we're teaching how to decode the words one letter at a time and figure out what that means. But Vygotsky says that the original, the anatomical unit of language is not the syllable or the letter or even the word, but the phrase. And so we learn language through phrases and we learn words through their context. And so I thought, I brought this up at Hebrew school. I was like, this is exactly what we need to be thinking about because we are teaching language backwards when we teach kids the aleph bet first and then we teach them how to put the letters together into words and then we teach them how to recognize vowel sounds and then we teach them how to put them together into sentences. And that's all backwards. It's actually more about how you enact language through its use. That's more important. And so our Hebrew language curriculum is changing for this reason. And I'm new to it, so I'm new to the school, I'm new to the curriculum and they're changing everything and it's a bit overwhelming. But I really like the idea of taking a different approach to language acquisition.

Doyle Griffiths: So when did you start working?

Belinsky: I started working on December 15th and then we had a break for the holiday and so this was actually my second class I taught today.

Doyle Griffiths: How do you find the students and the context, I guess?

Belinsky: Yeah, the students are interesting. They're all really smart, like unbelievably smart. And they're all really interested in the material we're presenting. They have interesting questions about it. They have interesting perspectives on it. When they're well-behaved enough to have an actual conversation about it. You know, they're sixth graders so they're starting to question authority and question whether the things adults tell them to do are always right. And so there is some friction there, but I think they have a lot of respect for me as the new teacher who they don't have a rapport with yet. And so they listen to me better than they do my co-teacher who has been having some frustrating encounters with one student in particular who is kind of disruptive and bullying the other students and making it very difficult to create a welcoming learning environment. And we split the class up for part of the lesson and each teach different parts of it and he tends to behave better in my sections. But overall I'd say the students are great. They're really invested in learning more about their Jewish identity and what that means. And yeah, it's a real privilege to work with them, I think.

Doyle Griffiths: So I didn't think I'd be asking about this, but you started this job sort of in the midst of a spate of anti-Semitic attacks here in New York and I'm curious how that has affected your experience of it.

Belinsky: Well, today there's a march and a lot of students were absent because of the march. A lot of Jewish families are going to that march, which was organized by some larger Jewish organizations that I'm not really a fan of. A lot of Jewish organizations with ties to Israel, but I think it's really important that the students are aware of and processing what's going on in the world. And we seem to be doing that. We seem to be talking about it and creating space for those feelings because I think a lot of the students are scared, you know, and I think reasonably so.

Doyle Griffiths: Do you have an earliest memory of New York City?

Belinsky: I came here when I was a kid with my family and I remember a new Sonic the Hedgehog game had come out and I kept asking people in my family to borrow money so I could buy it and no one lent me the money and I went home crying because I couldn't get the new Sonic game.
And that's my earliest memory of New York City. And I just remember walking around like Times Square and seeing all the big buildings and just being like, I'm going to latch on to my family and not get lost because this is a huge city and I still feel very small in it. I think I'm still reliving that.

Doyle Griffiths: What year do you think that was?

Belinsky: I must have been like nine or ten. So I'm 28 now, so that would be almost 18, 19 years ago.

Doyle Griffiths: Who would you say are the most important people in your early life or communities that you've been in?

Belinsky: That's a hard to answer question. A lot of these things come down to the fact that I feel very dissociated from the person I was before transition. And so most of my big aha moments came later. I actually have a tattoo on my side here that it says, surely the Lord was in this place and I knew it not. And it's a quote from the Torah. It's said by Jacob when he wakes up from a dream and he has a vision. And he's like, oh shit, there's divinity here. And that's been largely my experience. That belated encounter with divinity. And as a trans person only discovering divinity in my body, which is why I got it tattooed on my body. Because that's what I discovered was there is the divine in me. But only after my transition did I discover that. So thinking back to who's the most influential person on me before I transitioned at age 21 it was kind of difficult.

There were a lot of moving parts, a lot of moving people who influenced me. And I was sort of all over the place with what I believed and what I thought. I was always an anarchist or a socialist. That never changed throughout my childhood because it seemed to me that I was like, if we could just share what we have, the world would be a better place. And that was the moral intuition I approached politics with from a very young age. But as far as my understanding of myself, I think it would probably be my best friends in high school, Luke and Claire. Luke is trans. Claire is... I'm not sure if he identifies as trans. Claire uses he-him pronouns but still goes by

Claire, last I checked. And Luke is a trans man who went to high school at the sister school to my all-boys Catholic high school. So we sort of did the whole swap. And we always joked about going back to our five-year reunion, pretending we went to the opposite school.

Doyle Griffiths: [Laughter]

Belinsky: But they're both devoutly Catholic people, but both very queer in their own way. And they definitely influenced my thinking about religion and they definitely influenced my thinking about transness because Luke was the first trans person I knew. And I was the first one to use his real name. Like, we had a very close connection in that sense. And Claire was my first girlfriend and turned out to be a lesbian and I turned out to be a girl and so it was all like, you know, that early pre-coming out gaydar that attracts queer people to each other. I don't know how it works, but we all found each other and they were very influential on me in that sense.

Doyle Griffiths: What about now? How would you describe your communities?

Belinsky: I have a number of communities, mostly in Philadelphia, that I'm very close with. And three or four years ago, I started a political collective called the Chavarut Collective. And the Chavarut Collective is a mostly leftist, mostly queer, mostly trans coalition of, and mostly Jewish, but not all Jewish. And we centered our practice around weekly Shabbat potlucks. There's this saying that more than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews. And I think that also is true of the collective, more than the collective has kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the collective. Because we do weekly Shabbat potlucks, everyone brings food, we do a service together, we say the blessings together, we share a little bit about ourselves and our stories and what we're going through at the time, and we all support each other. And that's been a really holistic, wholesome model for community engagement for me, and it's been going on for four years now. We survived two major schisms, we survived accusations of abusers in our community, and we, accusations of abuse that happened prior to the collective's formation, that we had to sort of grandfather in and deal with in our own way. And then we had to actually expel one of our members of leadership who was being, you know, patently abusive to a number of members in the collective. And so we survived all that, and I think it's largely because of the structure of weekly Shabbat potlucks that really held us together. Because we were at a point of like four or five or six people attending a week at our low, after the two schisms, and then now we're up to 10, 15, 20 people.

Doyle Griffiths: What were the schisms about?

Belinsky: The first schism was that, what I mentioned earlier, which was a claim about sexual abuse that happened before the collective was formed, and there were a very vocal minority, I don't even want to say a minority, it was mostly just one person, who really did not want to do any sort of process, did not want to create any space for dialogue or mutual understanding or coming to a healing place really wanted sort of retribution or consequences, which I completely understand, like wanting to see concrete consequences for people who are abusers. But they were the only member of the community who felt unsafe around this person

after it had been years since this actually occurred. And so they left the community, took a couple people with them. A lot of people just burnt out because we tried to create a transformative justice system or process, and it ended up falling mostly to the work of my chavruta, which means study buddy, partner, a variety of things in Hebrew, or it's actually Aramaic. But my chavruta, Jess, she tried to almost single-handedly put together a system with arbiters and a system with info gathering and assessing mutual harm, if that were the case. And it was like a 10-page document that she came up with, and it was all in very legal speak. And I think that was mainly the drawback to it was it was too complex. It was too much, and everyone who was looking into it was burnt out.

Everyone who was working on the problem was overwhelmed. And so we lost a lot of membership just through attrition during that schism. And the person who wanted this other person to leave, just in the sense of being banished, that person ended up leaving of their own accord. And so it kind of just blew over is what happened. Everyone burnt out, and we lost a lot of membership. And then we found new blood. We found new people to come in and really replenish that energy that had been lost. The second schism was just a breakup I had. We have had a number of problems with large-scale polycules [Laughter] becoming too clicky. And we had to institute some rules about PDA in chavruta events so that people would feel welcome and safe and not feel left out and not feel uncomfortable around people making out on the couch, which is like, you know, we're a young, queer collective. These things are a part of it. You have to have these conversations about when it is appropriate to express queer sexuality, which is so repressed in other spaces. People deserve to have a space in which that's appropriate, but it might not be this space, right? Because we're trying to create almost a family here, and it feels weird and strange to have so many people dating each other, so many people involved with each other's lives in such an intimate way, and it becomes very difficult to find any kind of mediators, any kind of objective point of view. It becomes very difficult to find any sense of belonging beyond that desire for each other, like what is our real relationship to one another, if it's not just who we're fucking, you know. So I had a pretty bad breakup with a member who had themselves brought a lot of membership to us, and so when they left the collective, I don't describe it as a schism, Jess and some others have described it as a schism in the past because we lost so many members, but it really was just a bad breakup, I think. That was the main issue.

Doyle Griffiths: What other than Shabbat potlucks does your collective get up to that you would want to talk about in public?

Belinsky: Yeah, we do a number of things. We've done a number of trans clothing swaps. We've done mutual aid projects. We've raised money for people in need. We've helped people in the collective move. We've provided mutual aid and support to each other. We've been working on a whole slate of other projects that we tried out so many different organizational structures to try and make projects happen beyond Shabbat, and they largely haven't worked. We were talking about having a pay-nothing resource list, like a resource library, so you can borrow things from other people. We've talked about access to medical supplies and medical resources

and services and finding ways to pool resources to get people access to things like HRT or insulin or any therapy. And we've had medium success with those, but um there's a lot of getting people access to HRT off the books is very illegal, and so we don't talk about that so explicitly, but it's like we've wanted for a long time to expand the kind of services we do and the kind of resources we can provide. We also—I started a tradition of doing, reading the weekly parsha, which is the Torah portion that we read at Shabbat services every week, and by the time you go through a year, you've read the whole Torah. And so we've started doing that as a parallel to the potlucks. And so we do that weekly. We started a weekly check-in thread, so we can talk to each other and get to know each other, see what people are going through. A lot of us do a lot of other political work, is the important thing to remember. A lot of us are members of Philly Socialists. Some of us write for Regeneration Magazine. Some of us are involved with the Marxist Center. People have been involved with Food Not Bombs. People have been involved with a variety of other Jewish and leftist organizations in the city. We have a lot of members who go to Kol Tzedek Synagogue, which is the LGBT synagogue in West Philadelphia. And we're doing a lot of activism around that right now, because we have a member of the collective and of Kol Tzedek, who is a friend who is deaf and is struggling to access interpreter services. And so we've been advocating for them a good deal lately, and in dialogue with the Jewish community and Kol Tzedek specifically. And we're thinking about how we want to move forward at this point. But it's been a struggle, because finding Jewish competent interpreter services is actually extremely difficult. Because even if you're interpreting all the English in the service, there's still large parts of the service in Hebrew. There's still large parts of the service that are sung. The service is confusing to an outsider who's not Jewish. And so you really need someone who's both Jewish competent and a licensed interpreter. And that's a very hard intersection to find. And we've been really struggling with that.

Doyle Griffiths: One of the questions I suggest here is sort of about the experience of transness in a moment of increased trans visibility. And it occurs to me that there might be some overlap with that and some of the sort of increased visibility of Jewish people in this particular moment too.

Belinsky: Mhm.

Doyle Griffiths: Um so any comments on that? [Laughter]

Belinsky: Yeah. Like I think right now it's a really dynamic time to be trans and Jewish. I think it's this weird dynamic where like most of my Jewish friends are trans and most of my trans friends are Jewish. And so we're constantly fighting a battle on at least two fronts, if not more. And it strikes me as a time...when there are a lot of opportunities but also a lot of, you know, conflicts with people's families are really common and estrangement from families and trying to help people through that and trying to survive the holidays together, like having a Friendsgiving instead of a Thanksgiving dinner was hosted through the collective so that people who didn't have families to go home to could, you know, celebrate together. And, you know, we did a land

dedication and it was very critical of the idea of Thanksgiving. But at the same time, it's a time where people feel left out and feel alone um. And so we try to mitigate that um. It strikes me that a trans Jewish perspective is really important to develop collectively. And I think it is developing and it is out there. I'm like new to Twitter. Actually, I just got on Twitter a couple months ago and I'm starting to see the conversations that are emerging on Twitter, which are encouragingly similar to the conversations I've seen on Facebook and - Jewbook [Laughter] or, you know, whatever you want to call it. Yeah, there's a lot out there right now. Like there's a book that came out in 2012 called Balancing on the Mechitza. The Mechitza is the divider in Orthodox synagogues between the men's and women's sections. So Balancing on the Mechitza is about being transgender in the Jewish community and has a lot of first person perspectives. So that was like a really valuable resource that came out. There are trans rabbis, trans Orthodox rabbis now. Like it's a very exciting time. I mean, and it's exciting for me to be involved in Jewish education as a trans woman, as someone who brings a lot to the table in terms of my experiences with gender and my experiences with seeing the Jewish community in a more complete way, having been both in a, I was originally converting Orthodox and that was before I transitioned. And I got to see from a very traditional male perspective what the Jewish community looks like. And now I have a very radically different orientation as a queer trans woman.

Doyle Griffiths: How did that start? How did you decide to do that?

Belinsky: To convert?

Doyle Griffiths: Yeah.

Belinsky: I met someone named Ariel in high school, or in college rather. We started dating for four or five years. And they were the one who was like the efficient cause of my conversion. I saw Judaism through their eyes. They taught me Hebrew. They taught me almost everything I know about the basics of Judaism and about their Jewish practice. And I became very observant very quickly, very religious. I kept Shabbat. I kept kosher. I was Shomer Mitzvot, which means keeper of the commandments. And so I started to convert under an Orthodox rabbi in D.C. where I was doing my undergrad. And that all burnt down in a shitstorm because the rabbi I was studying to convert under turned out to be a sexual predator. He was putting cameras in the mikveh, which is the ritual bath, and recording women in states of undress. And he's now in prison on voyeurism charges. And he will never be employed as a rabbi in the Jewish community again. And that just devastated my sense of my Jewishness, my sense of my trust in the rabbinate and my trust in Jewish institutions in general. And this was like six or seven years ago, so it's taken me this long to come back to a formal conversion process, actually.

Doyle Griffiths: Interesting.

Belinsky: Because I was traumatized by this. I was really upset that I had left the Catholic Church for similar reasons, right? Because I felt that any religion that promoted this kind of thing needed to be protested and opposed. And now I found in the Jewish tradition the same thing I was running away from in the Catholic tradition, which was sexual abuse by people in positions

of power. And so that was really hard. That was really hard for me. But I eventually came back to it. Ariel supported me the whole time. They've been one of the most important people in my life. And yeah, other than that, it was mostly just Jewish practice in general that really motivated my wanting to be Jewish. It gave structure to my life in a really significant way. And Jewish song and Jewish liturgy and Jewish food, Jewish music, Jewish prayer, all of it really resonated with me at an embodied level. Whereas I was only theoretically interested in Christianity, you know? But I found something that spoke to me at this embodied level, and I ran with it. I ran so hard with it. Within a year, I was speaking to an Orthodox rabbi.

Doyle Griffiths: And then your transition was in between those two, beginning of conversion and presumption of conversion.

Belinsky: Yes, yes. And my transition began. I spent a semester abroad in Israel, actually, in 2011 to 2012, when the 2011 offensive on Gaza broke out. And that was a really troubling time for me, both in terms of me navigating my gender and my dysphoria and my uncomfortable position seeing myself as a male, but also in terms of just like the whole far student team, the student village was divided politically. Everyone was arguing with everyone over the war and whether or not, you know, it was okay or whether or not, you know, Israel needs to defend itself, whether or not Gazans are people. Like it was a very stressful time. And when I got back from Israel, I decided to transition. And I also decided that I would not go back to Israel at that point. And that was in 2012. I was about 21, 22 at the time.

Doyle Griffiths: So how do you see the relationship between conversion and transition? Because it seems like there's literal overlap, but also sort of thematic overlap.

Belinsky: Yeah, there's a lot of thematic overlap. And I see a lot of like traditional Bible stories as being about transition or being about conversion. I mean, the typical conversion narrative from the Torah or from the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible is the book of Ruth and Naomi. And she says to Ruth, she says, your people will be my people and your God will be my God. And it's in that order, right? The people come first. And so it's really identifying with the Jewish people wholesale, like for better or for worse, right? Like that's what made me realize I was a Jew when I realized that like there are people whose politics, whose opinions I despise, but who are still Jewish and I still feel connected to. And similarly with transition, like it was about identifying with women, about identifying with the struggles of women that I heard about, like people seem to, women seem to trust me with their experiences, probably intuiting that I'm not just a boy.

And so the more I heard about that, the more I identified with that struggle politically. And for a while I became like when I first transitioned, I saw myself as a lesbian in a very political sense. And it wasn't until I met my fiance, Alex, who is a trans man, that I really reconsidered my sexuality and considered bisexuality as an option. And so I think I followed that route that a lot of trans women follow with radical desire for women and desire to be a woman and desire to be with women, you know, all encompassing the same kind of dysphoria, all encompassing the same kind of motivation to transition.

Doyle Griffiths: Okay, we're back in business. I guess I'm curious if you want to talk a little bit more about your political history or biography.

Belinsky: Sure. So like I said earlier, I grew up with strong anarchist and socialist sensibilities. I was sort of undecided on which direction I wanted to go for a long time. In college, I was largely an anarchist. And I had, you know, I was in philosophy, so I did my undergrad in philosophy and religion with minors in Jewish studies and queer and sexuality studies. And I actually majored in philosophy by accident. I was taking religion courses and I got really into Buddhist philosophy. And I started taking a bunch of Buddhist philosophy courses and took a bunch of courses in just Eastern philosophy and whatever you want to call it. And I started getting interested in Nietzsche and Foucault and Derrida and Marx. And I was taking coursework on that. And then I went to speak to my advisor and I said, she's this little German lady named Andrea Chemplick. And I said, what would it take for me to add a dual degree in philosophy? And she said, okay, let's take a look. And she goes, oh, you're done. Let me get you a shirt. [Both laugh] And she gave me a shirt that said license to think on it, which I was like, okay.

Doyle Griffiths: [Laughter]

Belinsky: So I became more philosophically inclined and I started reading Marx more seriously. And at that point, I would say I became a Marxist. The more I read, the more I read from Marx. I really liked the early Marx, the German ideology, the economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844. I liked some of his transition works like the *Grundrisse*. And I was very attracted to this sort of what I would call like Marxist humanism, something like that. I was very attracted to the idea that what Marx says you can be a farmer in the morning and a fisherman in the afternoon and a critic in the evening and I was very attracted to that idea. His essay, “The Power of Money in the 1844 Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts” really influenced me. I've cited it in a number of recent works that I've written and especially this idea that money transforms impossibilities into their contraries. Money sort of transmutes our incapacities into capacities and vice versa. And so I became very anti-money and it sort of influenced my trajectory having read this essay very seriously towards Marxism because when I found out that the Soviet Union had still used currency, for example, which is like, this is a stupid criticism, but at the same time I was like, they couldn't have been socialist, you know, because Marx says money is bad, so Soviet Union is bad. And so that took me into like the sort of left communist milieu. I always identified as a Marxist and an anarcho-communist, but that was not so much because I thought that that is the necessary scale we need to organize society, but more so that I believe in alliances between anarchists and communists in overthrowing the state. And I think that a ideal post-revolutionary world will be an ecology of different societies, some of which are communists and some of which are not. Um and I think that's important to recognize that the sort of dream of making everyone into a communist is not necessarily realizable through force or through propaganda or through ideology. It's only really possible by proving to people that we're better at meeting needs than capitalism is. And so it's really when we get to test run, you know, what our society post-revolution might look like that we can prove ourselves to be better.

And I think that's the basic philosophy of like dual power and base building. And this is a whole paradigm I call needs first politics, where you start with people's needs and you meet those needs and they will become much more sympathetic to your theoretical point of view if you're feeding them and clothing their children and taking care of their children and taking care of their childcare needs and things like that. And I think it's worked very well for Philly Socialists. I think a lot of people who would not be socialists now are because they see socialism in action. They see what the Philadelphia Tenants Union, for example, is doing for tenants in Philadelphia and tenants' rights. And so, yeah, I guess I'm a very strange kind of Marxist in that I'm an anarchist. I'm anti-state, anti-borders, anti-police, anti-prisons, anti-military. And yet at the same time, I've read people like Mao, people like Lenin. I really enjoy reading them. I think they make a lot of really interesting theoretical points. I'm very interested in the history of revolutionary China and revolutionary Soviet Union. But I've also been really interested in the insurrectionist paradigm of anarchism and things like Tikkun and the Invisible Committee. I was really into them for a while. And so I jokingly used to troll people by calling myself an anarcho-Maoist. [Laughter] But now I just think, I don't really know who's right. I don't really care, as to what's the best arrangement of post-revolutionary society. I think there are a lot of debates around that recently came up in the Leftovers group, Facebook group, about central economic planning and to what extent that requires or entails the state and to what extent that's a desirable outcome. And I think that line is walked by left communists and anarchists pretty tightly. I think that they have different takes and approaches to the question. But I think ultimately they're dealing with the same set of questions, which is how do we democratically organize material resources in a way that is egalitarian and doesn't require bureaucracy or the state or all of that. And so I'm very sympathetic to those debates. And I tend to fall on the side of like there are some things that we need to work together to make sure everyone has access to, like healthcare, like food and medicine, like electricity and power. And those might need to be centralized to some extent. And to what extent is an open question for me. But that centralization, I think, does not necessarily preclude democratic control over them. And so I don't know. That's a philosophical outlook on a couple of state theory debates, but I'm not sure I've specifically answered your question.

Doyle Griffiths: I have two questions. You can pick which one you want to answer first, I guess. One is, how do you think your sort of lived experience influences that particular debate that you were thinking about? And the other one, if you'd rather go that direction, is when did you first encounter Philly Socialists?

Belinsky: So I think my personal experiences as an educator and as someone involved in philosophy and in an academic institution has given me values that a lot of Marxists would consider to be liberal values. I believe in open discourse and entertaining opposition and to some extent, like not fash opposition, obviously, and not white supremacists and not, you know, downright reactionary views. But within the left, I think there's a diversity of points of view that are valuable. And so I try to cultivate a space on my Facebook, online, among my comrades, among my friends, where we can actually talk about these things. And I admit more

often than not that I know very little about what I'm talking about on a lot of these issues. And a lot of it is just intuitions. And I think we need to rely on intuitions because I think as communists, we want better intuitions about how the world works so that the path to transforming it becomes clarified. And so I think, you know, I butt heads with other communists on subjects like education because I do believe in education as a humanizing value. Whereas a lot of people just see education as an ideological state apparatus, you know, just something that perpetuates bourgeois ideology. And so I think that brings me into tension with a lot of the left that is more anti-establishment, anti-whatever. And I'm sitting over here like, I think kids should read books, you know?

Doyle Griffiths: [Laughter]

Belinsky: Like, I don't care what they're reading about, just like as long as they're reading, you know, I think that's a good thing. And, you know, I don't think that makes me a liberal. I think that makes me someone who is open to people respectfully engaging with one another. And so um my personal experiences as an educator have definitely influenced my approach to Marxist pedagogy, I would say, in a very concrete way.

Doyle Griffiths: Ok what about the Philly Socialists question?

Belinsky: So...I became involved with them largely through my ex, who is the one who the schism happened when we sort of broke things off. And as a result of that, I've been stepping away from Philly Socialists since that happened, so roughly two years. I still follow all their Facebook groups. I follow what they do. I'm a dues-paying member. I still have my T-shirt. I'm still very supportive of what they do and of what my ex does in particular with them because they're very involved in the Tenants Union and in disability advocacy within the organization and things like that. I support their work 100%, but I try to respect their boundaries and their need for space.

And I think we've been getting to a point lately where we're starting to find common ground again and be able to talk about being in the same spaces together. We haven't quite done it yet, but a mutual friend invited me to their party outside of the Facebook event, and I didn't realize that my ex was the host of the Facebook event. And so they messaged me and were like, why are you attending an event that I'm throwing without talking to me about it? That seems weird. And I was like, that would be weird if that were the situation [Laughter], but I did get invited over Messenger and didn't know about the official Facebook event. And we talked about it, and they said, well, I'm not going to be there until later in the night. It sounds like you're showing up early, so maybe we won't even see each other. I ended up going. I didn't see them, but we were able to have a conversation about being in the same space together and maybe that not being a conflict. So I have hope that I can be more involved with Philly Socialists in the future. I was briefly working on a project with a number of Philly Socialists members. There were about five of us. One of them was my colleague from my program. Another one was a partner or a comet of mine. A comet just being a partner who comes in and out of your life

like a comet does. Yeah.

Doyle Griffiths: Ok, yeah. [Laughter] Interesting.

Belinsky: Yeah. And a friend from the Chavarut Collective and then at least one person from Philly Socialists who I did not know other than my affiliation through Philly Socialists. And we were working on a project called Climate Apartheid. We were looking at the UN's use of that term in their latest report on climate change. What I like to call climate catastrophe because I think we're at that point, especially with things in Australia right now. This is a side note, but at what point do we evacuate Australia in how many more years, how many more summers like this? And then I had the idea of like, what if we just tricked all the white people into evacuating and decolonized it that way? That would be really cool, but that doesn't seem like a very viable option umm. But it's a very scary time. And so we were working on this project on climate apartheid and we were working with this trilogy of terms of climate imperialism, climate apartheid, climate genocide, and arguing that we were in the stage of climate apartheid and that eventually climate genocide would be the result and that these are overlapping periods. So climate imperialism is still ongoing but has been going on for a century or more, probably more. And climate apartheid is apparent, it's happening, and that climate genocide is already beginning. Like if you look at the US border right now and the policies which are very reflective of policies used in Nazi Germany against disabled people, like the way they're taking away people's medication, people with type 1 diabetes are being refused access to insulin. And as a type 1 diabetic, that's one thing I didn't mention earlier is when I was diagnosed with diabetes in 2012, I actually was in Israel, I got sick, I was hospitalized, I missed my flight home, and then ended up coming home and having this conversation with my doctors that you're a diabetic now, your whole life is going to be different. That really was part of radicalizing me, was realizing the price of insulin and the price of these treatments for diabetes and just how expensive it can be. And the fact that diabetics all over the country are like rationing their insulin and dying from it because they can't afford it. And there was a story of one woman who lost her son to diabetes and brought his ashes to the CEO of the pharmaceutical company that made the insulin that he couldn't afford and brought his ashes to him as a protest. And that was a tactic that I've written about before, that was used by ACT UP during the AIDS crisis, was dumping the ashes of AIDS victims on the White House lawn, right? So it was very exciting to see that confluence of tactics, but very dark and scary at the same time to think about the context for it and why it's happening. So I don't remember how I got talking about diabetes, but it was a large part of what radicalized me.

Doyle Griffiths: That was going to be my next question anyway. I have a follow-up too, which is sort of thinking about the relationship between disability activism, trans and queer activism, religious identity and politics around that. How do you see those things kind of relating to mass socialist organizations like Philly Socialists or other things like that?

Belinsky: Yeah, that's a good question. I know my friend who is deaf has had a lot of the same struggles getting access to interpreters through Philly Socialists that they have through Kol

Sedek, our synagogue, and had to sort of fight them on it, you know? And that's their report to me. I haven't experienced that firsthand or seen that firsthand. Like I said, I took distance from Philly Socialists, so I can't speak to it personally. But, you know, I think it's super important that organizations like Philly Socialists are doing the work of disability activism, of queer and trans activism, of, you know, seeing the interlocking relationships between these different struggles. Because, you know, disabled people's rights are human rights, you know? Or if you don't want to say human rights, then it's about human dignity or human flourishing, human celebrating what it means to be human. And I don't think you can have a revolution without that, you know? And, you know, I share a lot of beliefs with my friend Noah, who's in Leftovers and in a number of left book circles, just came out with a great article in the New Inquiry about being transmasculine and dealing with the teachings of feminism alongside of being transmasculine. And it was a really beautiful article, and it brought up a unitary theory, which was a theory by Lisa Fogel in Capitalism and the Oppression of Women, which came out in the 90s, I want to say? Or, what, 81? Okay, so much earlier than I thought. And that idea of unitary theory was really appealing to me because, you know, I've read Hegel, [Laughter] you know? And Hegel teaches that, you know, Geist or spirit, you know, totalizes everything that came before it. And I think that's what capitalism does, like patriarchy pre-existed capitalism. But now that we have capitalism, we have capitalist patriarchy, right? Like it's a part of capitalism now. It's a part of the division of labor. It's a part of how our economic resources are arranged. And so I think that's true of disability, and I've done a lot of work on drawing analogies between social reproduction theory with disabled people, and our particular embodiment with respect to the value form, with respect to the labor relations that we find ourselves in.

Doyle Griffiths: Actually, I think Noah in that article cited Cinzia Arruzza, and I think I didn't tell you, but we're in Cinzia's apartment right now.

Belinsky: Oh, are we? That's amazing. Yeah, it's a small lefty world. Yeah, I sort of argue that disabled people have a very particular relationship to the means of production insofar as we carry our embodiment with us into the workplace. In capitalism, there's this idea of isomorphism of laboring subjects, and by that I mean you can exchange the labor of one laborer for the labor of another laborer and pay them the same wage, and thereby create an economic equivalence between two different laborers, even though they're two completely different people. Disabled people can't do that to the same extent. If you have a stomachache, you're expected to clock in at the door and leave it at the door and just grin and bear it. Disabled people bring their embodiment with them into the workplace, and that affects the temporality of their relationship to production. You can't value disabled people's labor and able-bodied people's labor in the same way without acknowledging our differing relationship to temporality, especially when it comes to social reproduction, to our ability to come back onto the market as laborers each day, ready to work for the next day. That requires a lot more background labor, a lot more unwaged labor, just in terms of the community care that we need in order to... uh the health care, the social reproductive labor, the feeding and bathing and clothing ourselves, all

these things are harder for us, by and large. And so I think of disability as resulting directly from the economic conditions of capitalism rather than being an identity analogous to queer or trans identity, right? I don't think of disability as an identity. I think of it as an economic category. And that's sort of my take on unitary theory with respect to disability, is sort of how that works.

Doyle Griffiths: Totally different register. When did you get your tattoos?

Belinsky: I've been getting tattoos pretty steadily since 2012. It's been a steady stream of stick and pokes, and a number of close people in my life have done them for me. I've done a few myself. I got a few shop tattoos. This is Yiddish on my arm. It says, Ker Avel Taint, which means overturn the world today. That is a quote from Rabbi Schneerson, who is a... very complicated figure, and I'm quoting him ironically. He told this story in a famous speech about how if you were a Jew during the time of the Second Temple and you knew that the Temple was about to be destroyed, wouldn't you do everything in your power to stop that from happening? Wouldn't you even overturn the world to stop that from happening? And he says that's the level of moral crisis that we're at today. We need to Ker Avel Taint. We need to overturn the world today. And I agree with him, but for different reasons, you know, because he thinks it's modernity and secularism and getting away from the principles and teachings of the tradition. And I think it's more about capitalism and the oppression of different races and people of different abilities, people of different sexualities and genders. And so I sort of appropriated that quote for myself. And then the other one, on my other arm, it just says Machashefele, which means little witch in Yiddish.
So those were my two shop tattoos. I have a number of other stick and pokes. It's been a journey. I have diabetic on my wrist in case I ever need to be resuscitated by paramedics. They can know that I'm a diabetic. It's more practical than a bracelet because I would lose a bracelet. [Laughter] So it's permanently on my body. I was thinking about getting diabetic on this wrist and then dialectic on this wrist. [Laughter] But I have yet to get around to that.

Doyle Griffiths: Do people ever like react negatively to you having visible tattoos in like a religious context?

Belinsky: Not so far overtly. I feel like I've lost a lot of job opportunities once people saw me in person. I got to like the interview stage of a number of different jobs that looked really good. And they seemed very friendly and seemed very interested in me employing me. And then all of a sudden a couple of weeks later I hear back and they're like, I'm sorry, it's not going to work out. And I wonder, it could be anything. Is it because I'm disabled? Is it because I'm trans? Is it because of the tattoos, the hair color? Like it could be anything or a combination. And so I sort of accept that there are limits to what I can do based on how I choose to present myself.

Doyle Griffiths: And what kind of jobs have you worked in mostly?

Belinsky: So mostly I've been a student. I'm on medical leave of absence from my PhD program in philosophy at Villanova University. I completed my master's there. And so I've mostly been

employed as a student teacher, as a teaching intern is what we call it to distinguish ourselves from teaching assistants, which is more divide and conquer ideology of trying not to let us unionize together with the TAs. But the point is to explain that we are doing concrete teaching work. We're not just grading papers. We're actually teaching whole classes and doing things like that. And so they call us teaching interns. But I also worked as an editorial assistant for Hypatia, a journal of feminist philosophy. They had the big scandal with the transracialism piece that came out. That was after I left, thank God. But I recorded a number of podcasts for them, which was just taking book reviews and recording them so that people could access them without having to read them. And so if you go on the Hypatia's website, you'll find a number of podcast recordings listed under Zoe Belinsky. They're still up there. And there's some really good archive material up there. So I did some of that. I currently work at the Jewish Children's Folkshul in Philadelphia, which is a secular humanist Jewish community. It's very social justice oriented. It's very progressive, I would say. And I work as an administrative assistant/curriculum planner with the director, Bethann Margolis-Rapp. And it's kind of a complicated situation because it's a Jewish institution, so it has a board, and the board allocates the budget, and the budget is very thin. And so they do not have the money to actually hire me to do the work I'm doing. And so Beth pays me out of pocket. And I work as her assistant, essentially. We tried to get me formally hired with the shul, and there were just too many barriers. But I continue to do work with her during the week. And then on the weekends, I'm working at the Union Temple of Brooklyn up here in New York, which is why I'm here. And um I teach sixth grade Torah school there.

Doyle Griffiths: Okay, so if sort of wrapping up our interview, if there's one thing that you wanted people to hear from you, what would it be?

Belinsky: That could go a lot of different directions.
Doyle Griffiths: [Laughter]

Belinsky: I guess I'm really excited about this piece I have coming out in Jules' book with Pluto Press, Trans Marxism. And I have a piece on Merleau-Ponty and social reproduction theory and a lot of what I was talking about with disability as an economic relation and not an identity is in that piece. It's about the theoretical point is Merleau-Ponty says that consciousness is an I can as opposed to an I think, like Descartes. And I argue that consciousness originally is an I cannot, I can't. Because we come into the world in a state of incapacity and it's only through a process of labor that we are able to capacitate ourselves as subjects, either our labor or other people's labor to raise us as children and to take care of us and to teach us about the world. And so, you know, you say I'm hungry, I can't access food, but then someone teaches you how to fish and then you do labor and then your hunger pains go away because you've fed yourself. That's a process of capacitation that actually meets needs and lets you come back onto the labor market with your I can intact. I'm not denying Merleau-Ponty's notion that consciousness can be an I can, but I'm saying that it starts as an I can't and that there's a dialectic between the two. You come home from work and everyone's familiar with this, you're so burnt out from work that you

just can't do anything but just like lay down and turn on the TV. And it takes labor to get you back to the I can where you can actually do things again. And so I argue that disabled people struggle with that a lot more because of our disablement, which is not a result of our embodiment but a result of the conditions of society in which we find ourselves. So it's the economic model of disability that I'm taking the social model of disability and taking it a step further. So I'm really excited about that piece coming out. I'm really excited about the work that the Chavarut Collective continues to do. We have a new leadership structure, which is really cool that we've been using since summer. It's my idea. I feel very good about it. We have Chavruta pairs, so study buddy pairs in coordinator roles. So we have three basic functions, the Shabbat and events coordinators, the organizational coordinators, and the hospitality coordinators. And I am currently serving a term as a hospitality coordinator, which is basically welcoming new membership, outreach to new membership, and work with other organizations. We've been focusing on the first two as we're getting started with this new leadership structure, but the third is a long-term goal. And the way the organizational structure works is you have these two coordinators serving six-month terms, but they're overlapping. So you have three months with one coordinator and three months with a new coordinator. And so as they overlap, there's on-the-job training, essentially. You always have someone who has been in the role before, who is experienced in the role, who actually can educate the next person to step up to educate the next person. And so it's a great way for institutional memory. It's a great way for institutional continuity to bring projects to completion rather than just start them and then burn out. And it's a great way to make sure everything is democratic and rotational and not a select group of leadership who stay in power for long periods of time. And I actually, the Philosophy Graduate Student Union at Villanova, this is where I test ran this idea because they had co-chairs who served for a year. And I said, why don't we have them serve every six months? And that way there's always someone on the job who can educate because it's so overwhelming to come into all that responsibility at the beginning of the year. And both people are in the dark as to how it all works. And so this system has been adopted by the Philosophy Graduate Student Union and has been adopted by the Chavarut Collective. And so I highly recommend that people try out working in pairs and then rotating those pairs in an overlapping capacity because that seems to work.

Doyle Griffiths: Yeah, we're sort of trying to do some of that in my group too. Yeah. Anything else that you want to add?

Belinsky: Just stay hopeful, you know, because it's really dark and things are coming apart at the edges, but that is also what we want is for things to fall apart a little bit. Even though, you know, the material impact on people's lives is terrible, at the same time there are opportunities for rapid expansion of leftist organizations and leftist practices that can really make an impact and pave the way for a better world. And I strongly believe in that.

Doyle Griffiths: Anybody else you think that the Trans Oral History Project should be trying to interview

Belinsky: My Chavruta Jess Levine, who helped me start the Chavarut Collective and is largely the result or the reason that I'm here and able to be here. She has taught me so much. I've taught her so much. We are, you know, we're partners, but in a very political sense of the term partner. Like we built this community together as a part of our relationship. And so it was an outward facing relationship, not an inward facing one. The kinds of intimacy we find between each other are all about the political work we do. And she does so much. I mean, she's very well known. She's got a huge Twitter following. She's Jess from online. I don't know if you've heard of her, but she definitely would be someone to reach out to who could tell you a lot more of the nuts and bolts, because she has a better memory than me about the Chavarut Collective. And also she's worked with Philly Socialists. She's written for Regeneration Magazine. She has an article on bass building coming out. She's really, I cannot say enough, she is one of the most amazing organizers and just dedicated people I've ever met. And she's as new to it as I am. And yet, we've been doing this for three or four years together. And yet she has accelerated in leaps and bounds beyond what I'm capable of and will always be an important source of support in my life. And I think in many other people's lives, too.

Doyle Griffiths: Well, thank you.

Belinsky: Mhm.