

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ANDREA LONG CHU

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien, and I will be having a conversation with Andrea Long Chu, 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 November second, 2018, and this is being recorded at the NYU [New York University] department of sociology.

Andrea Long Chu: Hi!

O'Brien: Hi! How are you today?

Chu: I'm pretty good, I'm pretty good.

O'Brien: I guess just start off and tell me a little bit about the, like, what kind of work you do these days and what you're up to and how you spend your time.

Chu: Yeah, so I'm a graduate student at NYU, a doctoral student. I mostly try to avoid doing anything that has to do with the institution [laughter], as much as I possibly can. And I'm a writer these days, so I'm doing a lot of freelance writing and, uh, working on a book right now for Verso, and then I'm probably going to try and sell another book in January. So a lot of my life is consumed with writing and then most of the time I spend writing is actually spent on Twitter being an asshole. So that's sort of how I spend my days [laughter].

O'Brien: What do you write about?

Chu: I write about, broadly speaking I think I write about, sort of, gender, sexuality, feminism. I've written a number of things about, from a sort of personal perspective, about being a trans woman. That was this essay called "On Liking Women," which was published in *n+1* earlier this year, like January 2018. And that, I think got a lot of, has gotten and continues to get a lot of—has sparked a number of conversations. And I write about, also like, I mean I also I just do, I kind of like—you know I've written some book reviews. The book I'm working on right now, collect—is called "Females: A Concern." It collects—I'm like having trouble describing it because it's like such a mess [inaudible]. But it's like, it's broadly on femaleness as political suicide. It's a sort of pessimist vision of femaleness. I don't even know if it's feminist at this point, and I'm not sure I want it to be but—and it's rooted in Solanas, Valerie Solanas, who is very important to me. Um, yeah.

O'Brien: And in what sort of a sense are you an asshole about Twitter?

Chu: [laughter] I'm an asshole about all kinds of things on Twitter. Oh, I'm just, I mean I love Twitter, I really love Twitter and it—I mean I'm an asshole about pop culture stuff, I tweet mean things about people I don't like in the public sphere. And generally I'm interested in performing a kind of, like, not put-togetherness or a kind of—I don't know I like being kind of dumb and sloppy on Twitter. And I think—it's not like a political practice or something [laughter] but I think—I think it's interesting to me as a woman and as a trans woman to be, like, a dumb shit

on Twitter because—because there is a lot of respectability that under guards a lot of trans discourses, even like the same discourses I think that would call respectability politics a bad things. There's a sense of, like, dignity or a sincerity that can run in those ways of thinking and I like, I like saying things that I think a lot of us know but no one wants to actually talk about because they're uncomfortable. SO that's the kind of dicking around I do on Twitter. And I tweet very mean things about Jill Soloway.

O'Brien: Who is Jill Soloway?

Chu: Oh Jill Soloway, the creator of *Transparent* and *I Love Dick*, the Amazon original series. No Jill Soloway is just a, just awful [laughter].

O'Brien: Well, let's loop back around after hearing a bit about your life to your intellectual concerns and cultural concerns. [laughter] Yeah?

Chu: [laughter] Sure.

O'Brien: Where did you—where were you born and where did you grow up?

Chu: I was born in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. My father was finishing his residency at UNC (University of North Carolina) and my mother was, at the time, was in a graduate program at, also at UNC. So I was born in Chapel Hill and we were there for a couple years and then we moved to Asheville, North Carolina in the mountains. And I was there for all of, for all of primary school. And so Asheville is like, I mean it's a small city—it's very like cool now, like I think if you live in Brooklyn you like might want to go visit Asheville because it's a, you know it's very sort of dikey and artisanal and you can walk down the street, like downtown. You have your pick of where you would like to buy your crystals, there's incense kind of wafting through the streets, it's a very hippy dippy kind of place. And, but I don't think I was raised around that, I mean it was peripherally there but my family is, I was raised pretty Christian and I was sent to a small Christian school, which by the time I graduated had ninety people in the high school, it was very small. And so that was like, I don't know, when I think of my childhood it's largely in terms of that. I don't think that we were, like I don't know I always hesitate to use 'devout' because I never know how to qualify religious belief, but, it was less about like a strong feeling and more about a strong set of—clearly defined set of things that one does. So like, you know I had to go to church, and I was, you know, went to like Christian summer camp and there were not uncommonly Christian aspects to like, sports that I was doing. It was pretty saturated. But yeah, so, North Carolina. Beautiful. I miss the mountains. Especially in the Fall, which it is right now. And I haven't been back, I've been in the state of North Carolina but I haven't been back to Asheville in, gosh I don't know, several years at this point, I don't know when I would be going back soon.

O'Brien: How did you feel about Christianity growing up, and what was your relationship with it like?

Chu: It was fine, I wasn't—I mean I was a very good kid, well I'm not actually using air quotes but I'm talking as if I'm using—I was like a very goody two shoes, kind of rule following — and I...so I sort of, I think I was a good Christian kid, it was never, again, it was never like a strong sense of religious conviction. And like church was boring but like I don't know, who doesn't think church is boring. Also because like the church [laughter] the church where my parents took us was this like very, this presbyterian, the conservative presbyterian church and the pastor was just like an old, an exegete, I mean he was a youngish guy but he just like, he reveled in doing the most boring books of the bible. Because it was like, I mean it was sort of classic hermeneutics, right? Which is the reason that you can read the bible is because you already know what it's going to mean, which is that Jesus Christ is your lord and savior and died for your sins, and so like the interpretive work of getting from like some random ass passage in like, Ezra, where they're like, I don't know it's about like them rebuilding a wall or something I don't know—[laughter] he would always say we're going to read, you know it's like, these verses, he would pick a book and, it really was, like occasionally we did something interesting. At some point in my childhood we did like Mark, and it was like such a relief to have like a gospel because like really cool stuff happens in the gospels but it was like Ezra and, like, I don't know, Micah and then like one of the lesser polyene epistles. It was just like not—but he just loved being, 'and I, you know, this is what's going to happen in the passage, and—

Unknown voice: Sorry to bother, just wanted to say hey.

O'Brien: Hey! We're in an interview I'm afraid, I can try to come find you after.

Unknown voice: Yeah, I'll be in my office.

O'Brien: Okay. [door closes]

Chu: He loved being able to say 'this is what's going to happen in the passage, and at the end I'm going to show you how it's about Jesus,' basically. Like he just loved the sort of, there was something a little tongue and cheek about it, but it was so incredibly boring. But I don't think, I mean I didn't question it. It was just sort of like what my life was, like I wasn't ... it never occurred to me, I don't know, it seemed obvious that anything that wasn't Christianity was just wrong, because that's what I had been told, and that's what made sense. And then later, in like probably high school, it became my first, sort of, encounters with philosophy. So like, theology I think is generally interesting and so that was like all of my—you know I would go on to do sort of philosophy in an undergraduate or graduate setting but it was my first encounter with systematic, rigorous systematic thinking. And that was, so I appreciate that about it still. And continue to find—I mean because when I was really bored in church, we had like the trinity hymnal as like, red hymnals with the little sort of triangular trinity symbol on them, and you got, you have all of those hymns and then in the back there was like the, you know a couple of creeds, like the nicene creed, the apostles creed, and then like the westminster sort of catechism and also the westminster confession of faith, and that was interesting. It was like reading the fine print, like doctrinal fine print. And so when you know, whatever, the pastor is going on about, fucking Ezra, I was just like, you know, reading about like, justification and sanctification and just like trying to eek some kind of intellectual pleasure out of the back of

the book. [laughter] But it definitely, I mean it definitely fucked me up. Christianity did. Especially I think in terms of how I thought about sex. For years I couldn't have an orgasm without, like, crushing guilt afterwards, it was just like I couldn't—which I don't know when you're a horny teenager is not a good combination because like you're still going to masturbate. And so it was like, yeah I felt an enormous amount of shame about that. And shame about sort of sexuality in general. And that took a long time to work through, coming out, which sort of happened in college. Yeah.

O'Brien: What was your relationship with your parents like growing up?

Chu: Um, it was good, I was a goody two shoes, and I was closer to my mother. at some point in middle school, again because this was this tiny Christian school, so at some point in middle school I got bumped up in math and my mother ended up teaching me, like it was somehow arranged with the school that my mother was going to teach me. It was like, you know, whatever. I was doing eighth grade math in sixth grade or something, and so I had, you know, so my mom tutored me for math, for like, I don't know, for basically most of middle school and high school. And so there was like a shared, I had like a shared intellectual connection with her, intellectual's not the right word, but I shared a mode of thinking. And I think I tend to take after her in a lot of things.

O'Brien: Was your mother becoming a math [inaudible] during that time?

Chu: No, she was at the time, she was a stay at home mom for, more or less since I was born and then this eventually would turn into, like after, well I think actually, at some point near the end of high school for me she started teaching at the high school part time, I think a couple years maybe she was full time, so she sort of ended up going back to work as a result, or sort of via having started tutoring me. But no her graduate work was in public health I think, I think she has a masters in public health. But, and my father is a pediatrician. So I have a, so I'm also like very good in terms of, like my, like I get my flu shots and I am vaccinated for like, you know, never going to get cervical cancer. And, but he was, you know, he was, worked a lot and, you know, just wasn't as close to him, but he's like a very mild person. So there was never anything like intimidating, I think, but I was definitely closer to my mom. Yeah.

O'Brien: What was, did you, what did you do for fun when you were a teenager?

Chu: I was a very, I was very very shy. I was really painfully shy and really socially awkward. And at some point, you know, and that started more or less when, you know, it was a puberty thing, and I kept to myself a lot. And I had one or two friends in middle school I think and one or two friends in high school, but I mostly, I mean I read a lot as a kid. I read a lot of science fiction, Isaac Asimov—what's his name, *The Ender's Game* guy?

O'Brien: Orson Scott—

Chu: Orson Scott Card. Who of course is like a conservative weirdo but like wrote great books [laughter]. And fantasy too, like Lloyd Alexander. A lot of Lloyd Alexander, like *The Prydain*

Chronicles. So I read a lot of fiction, an enormous amount of fiction. To such an extent [laughter] to such an extent that I developed this habit, so I developed like a diet soda addiction very, like, I don't know in middle school, that like still exists today. But it was like cans, and I think at first it was like Fresca, which is not a good soda, but it was, I just like had to have something but I would be reading like a thick paperback that you can hold open with one hand and I would be reading, holding the book in my right hand and with my left hand I would take a sip of the soda, and I would still try and be looking at the page, and so I would sip the can of soda out of the left side of my mouth, like askew, and like that's how I drink soda. I can't drink soda like head on, or just any kind of can or something, it like always goes to one side as a result. So I read an enormous amount. And I played video games - was a fan of video games, continue to be a fan of video games. And I did sports when I was younger, I did soccer when I was younger, and was good at it for a period of time, and then at some point it became about sort of like, it became about like proving your, I don't know it became sort of a kind of dick slapping contest at some point in middle school or high school and then it was, then it was really horrible and I got out. I spent, at some point in high school, began a project on my own, which was just a list of words. I was really bored in my literature class, it was this really, the school famously had one very good literature teacher and one very bad literature teacher, and this was the very bad literature teacher. And I just couldn't stand how boring the class was and so I think we were reading *The Scarlett Letter*, as you do in high school, and I just started writing down interesting words that I didn't really know, that Hawthorne was using. So like 'prolix', for some reason, I remember encountering the word 'prolix' for the first time. And so I started this list and it was like, manually, I had like, I had a notebook and so it looked like I was taking notes, which was great. And then at some point I transcribed the notebook to like a word document on the computer and kept this, like, lexicon of weird words; unusual words, words with unusual meanings, big words, and it was called *Balderdash*. And it ended up, there were like—and it was very like, you know, I was very assiduous about, you know it would have the noun, and like it would have the part of speech and it would have, you know different definitions broken up, and synonyms, and there was like, there was this whole, there was a whole method to how I would input a word, and I would just spend like an entire day working on that.

O'Brien: You were a nerd.

Chu: I was a nerd! I was a nerd. I was a big nerd. And that was like, that was a large part of my both my social identity and my conception of myself was that I was a nerd. Or a geek. I think I preferred the word 'geek'. I think that was the first line of my common app essay actually, I think, was "I am a geek." I think that the semantic distinction being that like a nerd could be socially awkward, but not intelligent. And the intelligence was very important to me. It was always like a sort of, a two sided thing, I got applauded when I did well in school and then I got told by my parents that arrogance was my greatest sin. It was like the biggest temptation, that was how Satan was going to get me, was through my arrogance. I was always sort of ping-ponging between

O'Brien: They saw Twitter coming.

Chu: [laughter] Yes, they did. At some point I turned around and gave Satan a big hug.

O'Brien: [laughter] So, anything else you want to tell us about your pre-college years?

Chu: I was, let's see, gender wise I think, I mean like I don't know, I don't have like a sort of Jan Morris sort of like whatever, I knew since I was like three kind of thing, it would be nice, like I wish I did, but I don't. If I look back now and reinterpret, which like who knows how true that is, but if I look back now, I have a strong sense of—I mean being smart, I don't know, being smart as a teenage boy in like sort of ruralish North Carolina at this little Christian school was like, I don't know, being a nerdy boy is a kind of alternative gender identity, at least when you've got a limited vocabulary with which to think about, and so I think that was like a way of sort of, sideways disidentification with masculinity, but I also just, I mean I loved being around girls. And I got to, I mean I've written about this, but I was briefly the score keeper for like the junior varsity and varsity girl's volleyball team, and it was like an amazing semester of my life because I just got to hang out, I got to be one of the girls, without that being, there wasn't, I don't think there was, there was no gender anxiety for anyone, like it wasn't actually a question of me like invading the girls space or something like that, I was just along and it was because I needed a PE credit and I wasn't doing sports, so I was already, there was built into it kind of a referendum of my gender failure. And that was amazing, and I developed very early on, in probably middle school, a sense of like, the girl's sleepover, as this sort of ideal form of sociality to which I would never have access. Just like the best thing I could imagine doing, is whatever happened at those sleepovers. I also, and the big thing I think I've left out about my childhood, is that I started doing theatre. In eighth grade, I was, my first role, was the major general in a high school production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. Which I had grown up knowing because my parents had like, in good middle brow fashion, were like Gilbert and Sullivan fans, and then there were a number of things I did, there was like Shakespeare, there were musicals. And theatre was, I mean I'm sure that there were kids who thought I was gay, I know my parents, I mean I suspect that my parents wondered if I was gay. I wondered, but not really because, I wondered in the sense that the impulse to say 'oh I wonder if Andy is gay', I understood the impulse, like I sympathized with the people that wondered but like, I had no attraction to men. Of course, like, spoiler alert, I was gay. But I, I mean you know, theatre is, maybe especially at that age, actually, where it's like before it becomes about like, I don't know, like craft and you know people being very serious about acting, there's like a lot of loosening of gender expectations in the theatre, you get to touch people a lot, in ways that you don't on other occasions, at some point in high school I developed the line, and it was sort of apropos of theatre because at some point I was trying to set it to music. I played the piano and took piano lessons since I was, from like six to sixteen, and I wrote a couple of, well I wrote a short musical, or much of a short musical in high school, in like a theatre group that I was in. But at one point I was trying to set to music a line, it would have been sort of the punch line of the chorus, 'I'm gay but I don't like guys'. It seemed to me like a funny song that a character could sing in a musical. But I still think it would be a funny song for a character to sing in a musical. [laughter] So yeah, theatre was a big part of my life.

O'Brien: And where did you go to college? And what was that like?

Chu: I went to Duke, in Durham, so it was, you know, right next to where I had been born, in Chapel Hill. It was far enough from my parents that they couldn't just show up, but they could come if I was like, for instance, in a play, which I was, many times. I was a theatre major for three years, and then got extremely disillusioned with theatre, because theatre had given me a window into, like, I started reading sort of like avant-garde stuff from the seventies, sixties and seventies, describing you know, like what art could do. And it was very clear to me that whatever the theatre that I was doing, was not doing that. Which of course like, now I'm like 'oh well that's because like, the people writing those manifestos in the sixties and seventies were wrong' [laughter]. But, so I was briefly, sort of, transfixed by the potential of an avant-garde kind of artistic practice, that coincided with some political radicalization, especially around feminism. One of the waves of the campus anti-sexual assault movement was going on at the time, and so there were lots of, you know, people said 'rape culture' a lot. And, you know, the frats (fraternities) would do terrible things. And there would be like discussions about it on campus and in the student newspaper, and I developed an obsession with—there were like a couple of student columnists who could be relied upon to write trash, or really offensive things. And so I appointed myself the champion of the comment section on the student newspaper, which was very important at the time. But it was partly about responding and partly about just getting in really good insults. And it was like a writing exercise, and I would spend like an hour writing, you know I would be late to class or I would not do, because I was crafting the best burns I could for—you know, some whatever—some nineteen year old dipshit who wrote a column about how the wage gap is a good thing, or something. And those comments have been brought up to me, like people do occasionally, from college, are like 'oh yeah, I really look forward to your comments on the student website,' [laughter] I say this because I think that was very much a sign of things to come in terms of my life and my persona. I shackled up very quickly, I got a girlfriend and we lived together basically for all of college. And I mostly socialized, like I was very good at, I think I'm good at being friends with people when there's like a—I was good at being, having a good time with other people who are in the plays I was in or something like that. But I never just wanted to like, go to a party, it just sounded like the worst thing. So I mostly socialized via her. She would have friends and I would sort of tag along. And, yeah I mean I had, again, a couple, maybe closer friends in college but certainly better friends than I had in high school. When I look back I think 'oh well, I don't know how well I actually knew people' or, I don't know there always seemed to be a kind of intimacy that I would like in a friendship that I hadn't been able to achieve in high school and that I still didn't feel like I was really achieving in college. Yeah, lots of theatre, lots of theatre. So much, like I think my first year I did three plays. Maybe like three plays and a reading, I don't know. I did a lot of stuff, I was in *The Laramie Project* [laughter]. I did a, I did do a professional show. One of the professors in the theatre department, Jeff Storer, at the time, I think he and his partner had just closed or sold this theatre. I don't actually know what the status is right now but, Jeff and his partner Ed had this like adorable, sort of, biker bear for biker bear situation. And Jeff directed the shows and Ed did all the books, and this theatre was called *Man Bites Dog*, and he had directed me in *The Laramie Project*, he asked me if I wanted to be in this show. The whole thing at *Man Bites* was that they only did world and regional premiers, so like they never did things that were in existence already. It was always new stuff. And yeah, I played, it was a small play, it was called *Edith Can Shoot Things and Hit Them*, I forget what the, I forget what the playwright's name was. And I played a gay boy with another, with a friend of mine who had also

been in *The Laramie Project*, so like made out with a person who was, at the time, another boy. We are now both trans. They're non binary. So that was interesting. What else happened in college? I don't know, at some point I discovered the thing we call theory in the humanities. I discovered French philosophy, and cultural studies, and dove into that at the last moment. At the very last moment, in college. I changed my major, I took all these classes, I was able to fit it in, wrote a senior thesis in literature. And that sort of is what ended up propelling me to New York - was going to graduate school. A professor I had as a senior in college, who was teaching I think the intro to literature class was like 'do you want to, like can you come see me after class?' And I was like 'oh fuck like—I still was a very goody two shoes, so I was like 'oh no, did I do something wrong?' This was Kate Hayles, Catherine Hayles, author of *How We Became Posthuman* - and she's the sweetest woman - and was like "can you come to my office?" and so I came after class, and she was like "so you're going to graduate school, right?" and I was like "oh I don't know" because I hadn't really come up with any plan, this was like fall of my senior year. And she was like "you're going to graduate school" and so sort of told me where to apply and wrote one of my rec [recommendation] letters, and that is what led to my ending up at NYU.

O'Brien: So a few questions about Duke, what years were you there?

Chu: I was there from 2010 to 2014.

O'Brien: What year was the big lacrosse ...

Chu: So the lacrosse scandal was right before it, I think it was like one or two years before it. It still sort of hung over campus to some extent ...

O'Brien: Now tell me about what you understood of the political landscape around campus sexual assault organizing, what was happening during those years that you were in relation to ...

Chu: It was really, uh, I mean college is where like I first developed a sense of patriarchy or even misogyny. I don't think I would have even given credence to that in high school. But maybe in high school what had happened was that I had figured out that it was party culture oriented, like the way i remember thinking about it at the time was that it was like, it was about frats and it was about alcohol, and it was about a culture in which predatory boys lured young women to these parties and took advantage of them. And then there would be these, it would be like layered over—so there was a—when I was there, there was like a—I mean, there were an infinite number of problematic frat themed parties, but when I was there there was a "pocahotness" scandal. Some frat email about a thanksgiving themed party had included a suggestion that women like, I don't even know how the word was used, I don't know if it was used to mean a kind of hotness, I don't know what part of speech it was—but there was this outcry on campus about it, I remember that being one of the first times I was really paying attention to something like this. So there was, you know, it was always overlaid with racialization or with a critique of the wealth of these guys, because there are a lot of rich assholes who go to Duke. And the frat culture is strong, at least was strong, when I was there. So I think socially how you existed was

sort of in relation to that, whether or not you participated in that, what you did instead of that. And I ... and there were, again, there was like a super there was some kind of racist party also again that like involved guys in sumo wrestler suits and something that, you know, resulted in protests on campus and things in the newspaper. And there was something else I was going to say about this and I'm trying to remember... Oh I don't know, maybe it'll come to me later. It was very—oh right—I think it was very—it felt very, sort of, second wavey. It was very “objectification is bad, sexualization is bad” very fixated on sexual violence and rape, kind of apocalyptic in tone. And I had a phase near the end of college that was like, I had sort of a full MacKinnon (Catharine MacKinnon?) phase. Just getting angry, I was just angry at everything all the time. Angry at any depictions of sex, angry at any text I felt—I don't know I was that kid in the class who was just always like—I was pointing out how problematic everything was. There was like a lot of hostility and kind of righteousness that I developed at the time, that I think has mellowed out to some extent. But it was physically, like I remember, it was such a strong sensation of—discomfort is too weak a word—of anger and like horror at how bad things were.

O'Brien: How was your sex?

Chu: My sex, how was my sex? Like the sex I was having?

O'Brien: Yeah!

Chu: It was, like, fine. It wasn't...I mean like I didn't have sex until college. I I don't know I think it was very middling. I mean I certainly think of it now as middling. It almost feels like unfair to evaluate it now. But I was never good, I mean what sort of eventually became clear was that I was never a good top and my girlfriend needed me to do that, and anything that deviated from that sort of put the relationship at risk, and so it was very unimaginative sex.

O'Brien: And the political rage didn't spill over into self hatred?

Chu: well I mean I'm sure it did. It was self hatred, I mean at the time, like what do you do when you're like a MacKinnonite and a boy? And I

O'Brien: I was the only male matron in my women's studies department [laughter] at the time.

Chu: [laughter] Right, and I've been, like I was one of two boys in a women's studies class with Kathi Weeks in my senior year. So I think there was this ... I mean I thought I was doing a good job, I think, in terms of like not making sex all about me or whatever it was. But, I mean, I had a lot of guilt about like, if I'm thinking about it, like shame. I think I had less shame around heterosexual sex and much more shame around pornography, because I watched a lot of pornography. From, you know, from middle school on. And got to college and was like, and still, you know, beginning of college I was in the process of sloughing off Christianity. And I was like “I'm going to stop!” and then of course, I didn't stop. And that made no sense to me, like I just couldn't, which of course I think is better for porn. You know, I don't know, if porn were totally acceptable it would probably not be as exciting. But I totally would—I had a great amount of shame about it because it felt so at odds with these feminist principles that I was developing. Yeah, I don't know ... it I think it did manifest more there than like in the actual traditional

intercourse I was having. To a certain extent, like if we're limiting it to college, like at a certain point after college it became totally untenable, but not really for feminist reasons. I don't know when I discovered it, but I think it was probably right after college. But at some point I—because like I would have shame about being able to get off better with porn than with my girlfriend, right? And I would—I think as you do, and you start to watch a lot of porn and start to go down these sort of rabbit holes over time, and so it was like, there was this progression from like, I don't know, whatever. Sort of run-of-the-mill mainstream pornography, to JOI videos, this is so funny that I'm describing my porn habits to the New York Public Library. JOI being jerk off instructions, so like where the woman is telling you what to do, like breaking the fourth wall. And that sort of went down a humiliation track until I hit what I wouldn't have even known to call this at the time, but until I hit sissy porn—about which I have written some, and some of which will be in this Versa book, actually—which involved lots of trans women, I mean it's a force feminization kind of porn, involved trans women or people being imagined—like cis women being imagined as trans women ...

O'Brien: This certainly isn't our first interview that includes discussion of forced feminization.

Chu: Is not! Right, of course! So this is like a thing, obviously, and it was very disturbing, I mean one because the language of—I've had people be very, I don't know I've had academics be like “oh that's really disturbing,” I think I really freaked Saidiya Hartman out [laughter] at Columbia with talking about sissy porn. Because it's so, you know, the language of brain washing and enslavement and all kinds of forms of non-consent and it really, it is like a radical feminist's worst nightmare, sissy porn is. So at some point, that started.

O'Brien: And this is during your MacKinnon phase?

Chu: This is after now, I think that was probably the first year of grad school. So I went straight from college to grad school. I think it was probably that, it's possible that I found it before leaving college, but I'm not sure. The most I'd ever done in college was paint my toenails. At some point I painted my toenails, using my girlfriend's—like with her permission—using my friend's nail polish, and that was like, sort of exciting. And then I didn't do that for a while, and then I started doing it again after college. But it wasn't manifesting in most places in my life, as far as I could tell, there was just this like ... like I would get in bed with my girlfriend, turn off the lights and go to sleep. And then I would go to the bathroom and look at sissy porn, because once I found it, it was the only thing that would, like if I tried looking at other things I would inevitably end up at sissy porn or some variation on it on Tumblr. And that was like, I mean it was sort of like, the my porn addiction had all along been waiting for something like sissy porn. In part because, I mean partly because now if I'm reading in retrospect, the whole thing was about trying to access a kind of sexuality that wasn't about being a man. But also because sissy porn, like directly, demonizes porn addiction. Sissy porn addresses you as the viewer and says like “oh you, you know, you sissy faggot you're watching sissy porn, this is like—put stuff in your ass” it invites you to imagine, or invite is too gentle a word, demands you to imagine your experience of porn as something that's turning you into a woman. Not just that you're looking at people being turned into a woman, but that the act of looking turns you into a woman. And that went on for like, two years. That was a long—it wasn't like, a couple weeks in where I was

like “oh fuck I’ve got to fix something,” like it was like, it just like sat there for a long time. Which is amazing in retrospect. But by the time that was, like once that was really locked in, then heterosexual sex was just, it was just like, not interesting. I could do things to, that were like about my partner’s pleasure, and I could like be into that, but in terms of myself, it was just like, I just really didn’t have any interest. So that was the first place, I think, the first sense I ever had that something was truly up, capital U “up,” was porn. Which I think is not uncommon and probably even more common than anyone knows. Because you said it’s not the first time you’ve talked about forced feminization, and I’m sure there are people who have been interviewed for this who didn’t talk about forced feminization, but for whom that was important because it’s, you know, we’re just gabbing about sissy porn and that’s because I have turned it into a part of the thing that I talk about in my work a lot as a way of—not even working through the shame—just like, making the shame public. But I think it’s horribly, it can be terribly shameful. And even now I’m like, oh gosh, I’m getting bottom surgery in a month, in less than four weeks from today, as of this recording, and the other day I was like “oh fuck, what porn am I gonna look at after bottom surgery?” Because if like the, if sissy porn were to persist afterward it would be like even more shameful because, my body would no longer match the, i don’t know it would just like prove how little a surgery had done, like why do I still wanna look at chicks with dicks if I’m not one. So, yeah. [laughter] I can—

O’Brien: Deep questions. [laughter]

Chu: I can talk a lot about porn.

O’Brien: So as clear from all the names you’ve dropped, Duke is quite a hot bed for theory.

Chu: [laughter]

O’Brien: Could you tell us a little bit about, as an undergrad, what excited you about theory? And what sorts of things you were engaged in?

Chu: Yeah ... I think when you, I mean I had been very, I got very upset with theatre, I got very upset with art because it didn’t seem to be able to live up to what it said. And because I was more interested in theories of artistic practice than actually doing the art, which was often not good, and so at some point I just got, I don’t know how I knew—like I don’t know what inspired me to do this or like how I landed on this, but I bought *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, I bought *The Order of Things*, by Foucault. And Marshall McLuhan, and I don’t remember what else, and just like read, I remember reading the first pages of *Anti-Oedipus*, on Christmas Eve, in like 2012 maybe, and was like “oh shit this is amazing”—which of course I don’t think I actually understood it at all, but I felt like I understood it and it felt exciting to me, and it’s a very weird crazy book, and appealed to the sort of lingering avant-garde in me, but also felt like it was saying some incredible things about the world. And so that was sort of my gateway drug, and then I just like devoured stuff for the next, kind of year. Theories, like it’s very, it was very exciting to, I don’t know, I think when it happens you suddenly feel like you control the weather or something. I think there’s a massive sense of power and control that comes from being able to describe the whole world in a single sentence, you know? Like these

sweeping statements about capitalism or about the heterosexual matrix, or about ... God I don't even know ... about being. Like it was so exciting to me. I just felt like I could do anything. [laughter] I don't, I've lost that feeling now, of course, I'm very jaded about academic practice in general, but at the time it was so, it was heady, and really really exciting. And so I took that class with Cate Hayles, and I took a class with Rey Chow, and Kathi Weeks. I never quite, and I think it was more because of a schedule thing, I never took a class with Jamison (Frederic Jamison) like I would see him, sort of, in the literature building, Frederic Jamison, sort of puttering around in his orthopedic sneakers. And I never took classes with Michael Hardt, but sort of knew him a little bit. But it was a very exciting place. I remember going to the feminist theory workshop, like my last semester, because I think that's in the Spring. I went to the feminist theory workshop and it was ... I don't know who all it was, but it was exciting that like, oh there's actually this thing that I've been trying to do and I had been trying to articulate, I think from the beginning of college, which was like 'how can I think systematically about power, but also about, you know, cultural objects'. I was like, 'oh there's actually a whole department for this, there's a whole world where this is possible.' And I was really, I was totally smitten. I took a whole phenomenology class, like it was just phenomenology with Mark Hansen, we read like, you know, like early Husserl (Edmund Husserl), and middle Husserl, and later Husserl, and we read like, Eugen Fink, not even just like, we read Heidegger (Martin Heidegger) and Merleau Ponty (Maurice Merleau-Ponty), but like some real off-the-beaten-path people, also, and that was enormously influential. That was probably, in retrospect, the most important class I ever took in college because ... that and Kathi Weeks' class, *Money, Sex, Power*, feminist theory class, but ... because I am a card-carrying phenomenologist now. And that's still the thing that is undergirding my public writing too, I'm not constantly expostulating about Heidegger but it does, it has given me a set of assumptions about—especially how we talk about feelings—that are still very very close to me.

O'Brien: For people that might know your public writing, but not phenomenology, could you tell us a little bit about the connection?

Chu: [laughter] So phenomenology, very basically, is the study of experience. Phenomenology is about trying to study consciousness without reference to some sort of objective world. So the classic example is "if I"—this is Descartes (René Descartes), "if I'm asleep and I see a flame and I feel the heat, it might not be true that I'm actually seeing those things and feeling those things, because I'm asleep, but as long as I'm feeling them, the feeling itself is true." Like the 'seeming', as Descartes calls it, the 'seeming' can't be doubted. And so that by itself, that whether or not there is something behind an appearance, the appearance is valid as appearance, is the basic assumption of phenomenology. And so that means, for instance, when we talk about, I'm trying to like tie it to a concrete thing, so when we talk about #metoo, or like I've written some about #metoo for n+1, a phenomenological approach to sexual harassment involves thinking about ... something will happen, you're not quite sure what it is, you turn it over in your head, like 'did he actually just do that? Am I misunderstanding?' and there's a way that you can become sort of trapped with your feelings. Like one of the—the thing that you're always worried about in sexual harassment is that it's all in your head. And that's actually like, I think, partly constitutive of the kind of injury that it is to get harassed, that harassment never says like, "hey, I'm harassment" it always is buried in this kind of epistemological uncertainty.

This uncertainty about what you, what actually happened versus what you're feeling. And so, I'm just trying to give an example of how phenomenology still kind of informs my thinking. Another would be ... another would be just that I don't like describing one feeling in terms of another feeling. So like I'm very pro self-loathing in a lot of my work, often, not just this, but often at my work about being trans, because there is a self-love or self-care discourses that are probably dominant in the way that trans people talk about themselves to cis people, but also talk about themselves to each other — certainly online, and in the public sphere. And I would much prefer to think about self-loathing on its own terms, instead of as some sort of deficit of self-esteem, right? It's not that I have low self-esteem, it's that I am self-loathing, that feeling, whether or not it can be described in terms of a relation to an objective world. Like if everyone's like "no, you're pretty!" "No, you're fine!"—you know, you can—as a trans person I'm constantly like "let me sit you down with this picture of my face, and show you all the different details that are wrong about it," right? Like I have a conviction that underlies that self-loathing and I want to be able to—I see like — so my task as a writer then would not be "stop hating yourself," which is like the worst advice you could ever give anyone. But more like, "what does it actually feel like, to hate myself? Like can I describe the contours of that feeling in a more or less sort of morally neutral way?" Can I think about, like, what does it feel like to be self-loathing? How does it affect the way I go about the world? How does it provide me a kind of, like a, a set of habits that can actually be sustaining? Maybe not feel good, but something I can return to and something that helps me not kill myself. So that's two examples, I'm very ... I'm very about feelings.

O'Brien: When did you encounter Valerie Solanas?

Chu: In college I did a semester in New York, it was like an Arts Semester. This was when I got disillusioned with theatre, because part of the program was seeing a bunch of shows. I think we saw one thing on Broadway, and then a lot of it was like off-Broadway stuff, and maybe there were some museums, and there was but there was like, the program was called like *Arts and Media in New York*. And we saw some good stuff and some bad stuff, but I got so fed up with, so fucking fed up with theatre. And so I did this art project [laughter] as my—everyone had to do a project in the program, and it had to be sort of vaguely art related, I don't know, there was a guy who made his own perfume. He was, like his family has a crest. Like he was real rich. You know, some people doing like preparing a set of audition songs, or you know, it was sort of, it was a mixed bag of stuff, there was all kinds of stuff. And for me, I got this idea that I would get a piano, I do not know how I got this idea, I got a stand-up piano, actually it's not a stand-up, what's it called when it's lower? Oh I can't remember the term for that. So like, not a grand piano situation, but not something super tall. It was like, maybe a yard high or something. And it was like a community center in Jamaica, Queens. I had found it on Craigslist, I corresponded and was like "hey I want to do an art project, could I"—I think it was free, like if you came and got it—"can I have your piano?" And she was like, excited! Because it was like, oh it's going to go to kind of a cool artistic cause. And so I schlepped out to Jamaica, I ... gosh it was a whole thing, I'm forgetting now how it worked. I think maybe someone else picked up the U-haul maybe, but at any rate, got it in the U-haul, drove like a U-haul van on the Brooklyn-Queens express way, with like a loose piano in the back, to the dorm room, which was in downtown Brooklyn, was like on Clark Street in Brooklyn. And then got the fucking thing into

my dorm room, it was an extremely painful process, because pianos are crazy heavy. So we lugged this thing, like with the help of some friends, got it into the elevator, which like it barely fit in my elevator, got it into the elevator, got it up to the like whatever floor, like third or fourth floor, and got it into the room, and this was a room I shared with two other people. One of whom was the person that I had made out with in that play, Jacob, so at the time two gay boys and me. And it was like, you know, we all had lofted beds and there was some room under the bed. I already had a keyboard that was my own keyboard, in the room, it was not that large, it was like, the whole room was like I don't know I'm terrible at estimating spaces, it was not huge. And it just sat in the middle of the room, and like somehow they were okay with this. I don't—or maybe they weren't okay with this, but like didn't know how to say no. But it was just in the middle of the room ...

O'Brien: [laughter]

Chu: ... and so what I did is, so like I did a bunch of stuff physically with the piano. I like fucked with it, I like pasted pieces of newspaper, and old record cases, and brochures — just like, sort of, paper ... awful that I found—on the sides of it. I rigged one of the—I like put some mirrors on it, I carved into it—I rigged one of the keys so that it would turn a light on when you pressed it. Like somehow, because you know, the way the hammers work, somehow I got it so the light would turn on when you pressed it. We found these bits of manikin on the street, like these legs of a manikin, from the thigh down, and I attached those to the bench. So I did a bunch of kooky stuff to the piano, and then—I realize like I still have not, there is no indication of how this is an answer to your question [laughter]

O'Brien: [laughter] Yeah! I'm like, I can't wait to hear the segue here.

Chu: [laughter] and, what I did with the keys, was I carved the name, the full name, of a writer into the top of the, into the white of the key, and then I ... well actually no, I think I did white keys and black keys, actually. I carved the name using, I don't even know what I was using to carve, it was maybe a, like a screwdriver or something, and then I ... so I don't know if you've ever seen like a piano key outside of a piano, but there's like an inch thickness and then like beneath the—if it's white key, then like beneath the white there's like maybe an inch of wood, it's like sort of a wood block. And then if you, then they don't—they're not straight. So the part of the key that you see on the piano is straight, and then usually there's a kind of wood rod that goes out from the key that is like diagonal. So they're sort of odd shapes. And then I would write quotes using a normal gel pen and like very small wording I would cover the wood of the key, the exposed wood of the key, with quotes from manifestos from the sixties and seventies. Or, like, but not just—like some were arts manifestos, and some were like philosophy texts, and some were—so I think like, there was probably, like I'm sure there was a Deleuze (Gilles Deleuze) key, there was a Derrida (Jacques Derrida) key, there were, like there was a John Cage key, and a George Brecht key, and like a Yoko Ono key. And there were all of these different—and I did, not every single key, but maybe 60 out of 88 keys or something. It was most of them, it took an enormous amount of time. And served no purpose. Except that it was sort of incredible. And one of the keys was Valerie Solanas, whom I had encountered I think in the process, I think, of looking for things to put on these keys. Or whom I had encountered, maybe

via some other text I had read. And, yeah manifestos. It was all about manifestos. So I read the *SCUM Manifesto* on like the, I don't know, one of those trains that goes above ground between Brooklyn and Manhattan. I remember reading it, maybe just on my phone, because you know you can find it online extremely easily, and just being like "what is this?" And it was so enticing that—the severity of it, and it was like, you know, this was in the context of me just having read whatever, like, the *Futurist Manifesto*, which SCUM is not that different from, actually. I mean I think I had a key both for Marinetti (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti) and for the woman who's name of course I can't remember because she was the woman, there was like a female *Futurist Manifesto* that was done like a year or two later after Marinetti's. Which is like a fascist text, so not all of the manifestos were quote on quote "good," but, I mean, I don't know that I would have said that the Solanas one was good either. There's something totally fascistic about SCUM—I mean, it's arguably like, kind of what makes SCUM great, is that it has a—it's so extreme. There's a catharsis to that extremism I think, and just like, thank you for finally saying the obvious thing, which is that we should just kill old men. Like it's just, it's so wonderful, like such a beautiful impossible statement. And, so she was on, she was one of those keys on this piano. And I wrote my own manifesto to go with it, for the presentation for the end of the semester. Which was, I did using like all these weird fonts and sort of like, a collage, black and white pictures and overlaid things, it was very messy and weird, on Microsoft word. And then I made a Prezi, I made that into a pdf and then made a Prezi out of the pdf so that I could deliver the manifesto to the class while, like, sort of, the camera was moving between these different places in the pages. And then, I left the piano in New York and went back to North Carolina and never saw the piano again. And just like—I gave it to someone else who was living in the dorm. He was like "oh it's so cool!" And so, and I have no idea, we just like, we got it to his room and then it was like, I have no idea what happened to it. I'm sure it just got thrown away at some point. After I had done all that work, I saved a couple of keys, I don't think that I have any of the keys anymore, I do have pictures of it, I do still have some pictures of it. Yeah, so that ... so I encountered her at a moment in my life where I was obviously taking out a lot of buried aggression on a piano, and was like sort of saying goodbye to art, also. Because soon thereafter I stopped doing theatre, and started doing theory. But it was a very vulnerable period in my life. I was very angry all the time. And that's how I met Valerie Solanas. Was the pay off everything that you were waiting for? [laughter]

O'Brien: It was ideal.

Chu: [laughter] I think that's a pretty good story.

O'Brien: It's a great story.

Chu: It's not just "I got assigned it in a class."

O'Brien: Yeah. So Valerie Solanas, I mean this is—you've made a name, partially, by writing about her, and you know, she's commonly read as really quite extremely transphobic. And you ... what does it mean for you to be reading her? Like how ... what do you —

Chu: Hmm, yeah, I mean I think ... So I've written about how I think a kind of plastering of the accusation "transphobia" onto, you know, late sixties, seventies feminist writing is simplistic and is more about us trying to sort of litigate something now, than it is about—than it is an accurate description of the way things were. But, you know for me, it was like ... transition came out of a place of hating men. Like it really was born of a strong [inaudible] ... I don't even want to say 'position' because I think it makes it sound like it was an intellectual thing. It was like literally my roommate's, like some boyfriend of my roommate's was trying to bond with me, and it just made me so unhappy. I just remember texting someone—this was still like two years before I came out—but I was like "oh I just can't stand having to be a man for another man." And there was nothing—I don't know, he was like a perfectly fine ... he wasn't actually a terrible person but it was—I just couldn't—it was so infuriating to have to do that, to have to put up with that. So, I think like, you know, SCUM for me, the kind of apocalyptic approach to, you know the genocidal approach to men, feels like an obvious, almost like too obvious, allegory of what it felt like to transition. By which I don't mean to like, sort of, inflate the political stakes of transitioning. I don't—I wasn't like, "I'm going to be a really good feminist and become a woman," it was happening, it was not happening on an intellectual level. In fact, the opposite was true. I think before transition, I never really considered transition. It was something that happened very very quickly. And I didn't really have a closeted phase, so when I finally kind of figured it out it was like "oh this is very obvious," and I just started being a woman. And it was like the summer so I didn't really need to hide it. But I had felt that, like the feminist thing to do, as a man, was to repress your own desires and take up less space, and like self-abnegate as much as possible. Something like becoming a woman, I think, would have felt too, would have felt like man-spreading my way into womanhood. Like it would—it felt like there was actually, there was feminist virtue in ... trying to sideline as much my own desire, because I had learned that my desire was highly suspect. So I don't want to say it was some big feminist move to become a woman, but Solanas, who recommends transition in the manifesto. I mean, partly the transphobic thing is because she's getting lumped in a sort of, I think, careless generalization. I think she literally does recommend that men biologically, chemically, psychologically become women. That's just like a part of it. It's like one of several options that men have in the sort of post revolutionary landscape, for Solanas. You can become a woman, you can become just like a drag queen, that's sort of acceptable. She finds drag queens to be the most acceptable form of a man, drag queens and faggots. Or you can be strapped into some sort of oculus, like virtual reality situation where you're seeing through the eyes of some powerful woman, and you get to sort of just vicariously live her life through some sort of, you know, technological mediation. Or you can just like, be put out to pasture, I think, and be given drugs, and you can just like graze like an old cow, and then die. So there's like several options. And then she says if men were really smart, they would find out how to turn themselves into women. So I don't think, I mean, you know, was Valerie Solanas the person? I have no idea. Valerie Solanas, by all accounts, was not a nice person, who did not like most people, including most women. And so like, you know, what Valerie thought of the—obviously, I mean she spent a lot of time around gender nonconforming people, for sure. Both in the context of doing sex work, and in the context of doing, like the downtown art scene in the late sixties. But, I always thought just like, misandry, principled misandry, is like just the most natural political position, I think, that I just can't imagine finding anything else reasonable. So she's become very special to me, in that way, as like a forerunner in a misandrist project that I—which would be one way to characterize my

work. My work might be more misandrist than it is feminist, which is an interesting, would be an interesting question. I mean I'm sort of dragging myself by saying I may not actually be a feminist at all times. I'm obsessed with feminism. I love feminism, I hate feminism, whatever. But, yeah. There's just something so incandescently right about hating men.

O'Brien: When was it that you came to transition, rapidly?

Chu: So I—[laughter] rapid onset transition. I broke up with my girlfriend, or we broke up. She slept with someone else and it was uncomfortable, but it was also—the relationship was very over at that point. We were not on the same page sexually, it was not actually a real pain. There was like—I mean there were the pains of disentangling your life from somebody who you're entangled with, but we both knew it was for the best, and it was really fine, like totally amicable. And what happened was, so like, I found out—and it hadn't, like I knew right when it had happened, because she hadn't come home, and she was, at the time, staying with me in my tiny apartment in the East Village. And so we decided to break up—

O'Brien: Were you at NYU at the time?

Chu: I was at NYU at the time, this was in summer of 2016, so it was right before ... I had just completed two years of graduate school. And, so there was like sort of a day of mourning. And I—one of the first things I started thinking about, after we broke up, was “well I'm going to, I wanna try some things that I had been thinking about trying.” I had been painting my nails for at least a year by that point, and that had kind of gotten in under the wire, like that was okay. I painted my nails using the same color, it was this like particular *Essie* color, called mint candy apple. But like, there were two versions of it that existed and so I had to find the right one. But it was from her, from my girlfriend's—then girlfriend's nail polish. And that was okay, I had floated to her maybe a year before that maybe I might like to try on a dress. And that was, like, very clearly “no that wasn't going to happen,” there was a brief crisis in the relationship. We were in different places at the time, and so I very quickly travelled to see her, and right at the ship, and I was like “okay, this is like”—and again, the rationale was like, this is upsetting to her, and you make compromises in a relationship, and this was a good boyfriend thing to do. I guess I'm just going to put it in a drawer and not worry about it. And I had made peace with that, it wasn't terrible. So we broke up and I was like “okay, well maybe I could try on lipstick, or maybe I could try on a dress” and was like, sort of thinking about this. And a day or two later, she came back to the apartment to pick up her stuff, because she was going to move to an *air bnb* for the rest of the summer, she was doing an internship in the city, so she didn't have a lease or anything. And, we sort of cemented the break up, like I think there was like a—she came back with a bit of a—she was like kind of in a panic, like “is this really a good idea?” And one of the things I said, was like, “you know, I think this gender stuff has been a thing that has been in the back of my mind, and just being broken up for a couple of days I've thought about it a lot, and that's really important, and you don't want that, and so I don't want to get back together.” And that made sense to her, and we sort of agreed. And then she said to me “do you want to try on some of my clothes?” Which I had been, on some level, waiting for her to ask me for years. And, so I did in this little apartment, we were sort of, we were packing her clothes up and as we packed them up, she would find something and say “oh, try this on.” And it was incredibly

exciting, I have some pictures from that day, and I don't think I cried. I wasn't on estrogen yet, of course, so I didn't have easy access to tears. I was emotional, for both of us. We both knew that what was happening was a really big deal. And so then, she gave me a couple of things. She lent—not lent, she just gave me—like a Brandy Melville dress, and this skirt, sort of unusual skirt that was sort of shorter in the front and longer in the back, and a couple shirts, maybe. I think a single pair of underwear. And I had never tried on—I don't think I had ever tried on women's clothes. I think I had probably worn things in the context of a play maybe once before, but ... I had thought about trying on her clothes without saying anything to her, but I never did. And it was—it was incredible and I was so happy. It was like the happiest—that month was like the happiest I had ever been. I had taken a class in trans studies, like a year before, and so I had all of the intellectual architecture for understanding what was going on. I didn't have, you know, I think some people have experiences where they're like “oh, something's up but, like, I might not even know the word ‘transgender’,” you know. Some people come to it differently, but I had like, all of the groundwork laid, I just sort of had to flip the switch. And it was the best month of my life. It was like, I told people at the time, it's like I met someone. It was like infatuation, it was like crushing hard on myself. And it was summer, and I didn't have any obligations, and so I was just going to the store and buying clothes, and I was telling all of my friends—I mean not even just friends, I was telling people that I hadn't talked to in years, because it was so exciting to tell someone that I was just like “who else can I tell?” And I ... and just doing, you know, like, got a purse at Kmart because I wanted to have a purse for something, and so I, like I had an event, I had something that day that I was doing, someone I was meeting, and so I just went and got a purse at Kmart, and I was wearing this deep matte purple lipstick, which in retrospect I'm a little, in retrospect I feel a little embarrassed about, like it was, you know, I didn't ... it was like a month of being trans—not being trans—it was a month of being a woman, and not having dysphoria. And then, at some point, the dysphoria started and has only gotten worse in my experience. So, you know, it was like having a crush for a month and now I'm like unhappily married to myself [laughter]. And, you know, every so often contemplate divorce. But I didn't have any insecurity about my body, I didn't have any insecurity about—like I got, you know, I read that the kind of breast forms I wanted to use were—so I got nude bras, those nude silicon sort of chicken cutlet sort of things that stick to you, and you put them on the outside, you kind of, you don't put them like where your boobs are going to be, you put them kind of farther out and then you stretch them so they meet in the middle, and it kind of creates a cleavage where there isn't any. And I got an A cup and a B cup, because I had read that someone had done this. And so I would put on the A cup and then I'd put the B cup over that, and then I would wear the bra I had gotten, in fact the day I got the—like I ordered them on Amazon, they came—the day that I got them, I had both dinner with my mother scheduled and a Tinder date. And so I went to the American Eagle in Union Square, which was just a short walk from my apartment at the time, and ... but the cutlets, the breast forms didn't come until like, I don't know, an hour and a half before I was supposed to see my mother. So it was like a time crunch. So I got very quickly to American Eagle in Union Square, dressed in my dress, and I get a bra, I go into the changing—you know, an Aerie bra—I go into the changing room, I put on the breast forms, I put on the bra, I put on a dress, check that it all makes sense, and then I take off the breast forms, take off the bra, take off the dress, put on the boy clothes that I have in my bag, come out of the dressing room dressed as a boy, buy the bra—for presumably my girlfriend—get in an Uber, and go have dinner with my mother—who happened to be in the city

for some reason, so it was sort of some last minute thing. And so I go have dinner with my mother and my sister, as a boy, with my bra and my breast forms in my bag at dinner. And then, dinner is over and I rush back to my apartment and I put everything on, and I put on the dress that I got, and I go and have this date. This is a crazy, crazy day. And had sex for the first time as a woman, that night, which was completely incredible. And that was that day, and the date was like an open mic, or it was comedy at Blue Stockings, some of which was not good and some of which was good. And now one of the people—one of the comedians I saw at Blue Stockings event follows me on Twitter. So that's that whole story [laughter].

O'Brien: How long ago did you say that was?

Chu: That was the summer of 2016.

O'Brien: Okay, so you're at Duke, you applied to NYU, you came here, and then two years in?

Chu: Two years in, two years in.

O'Brien: You were in a PhD program at NYU? The same one you're in now?

Chu: Yes, I was at a PhD program in comparative literature at NYU, where I am now. I ...

O'Brien: Kept reading theory?

Chu: I kept reading theory, I got very fed up with my department very quickly and I started looking—because the department is, comp lit at NYU, the troubled comparative literature department at New York University is an extremely [inaudible] ... has really indentured itself to some dying arts, I think. And, really doesn't have a cultural studies sort of wing to it, and doesn't even really have much in the way of feminism or queer theory. There's some Marxism, but ... and so I very quickly started looking elsewhere to .. NYU is a part of — has a consortium for graduate students, you can take classes at other institutions in the city, and so I took a class with Saidiya Hartman at Columbia, and I took a trans class with Paisley Currah at CUNY (City University of New York). Paisley is now a dear friend. I took several classes at CUNY, actually. I took a class at the New School. So I was very quickly fleeing that department, and then transitioned ... again, it was during the summer so it was easy. I didn't have to ... it wasn't a worry of “oh we're in the middle of the semester and I've been going into this class and now I'm suddenly going to show up looking different.” There was time to, sort of, email people and let them know that something was up, you know, all of the other people in the program that I knew already knew by that point, or most of them, anyway. And I could let my professors know before I actually had class. I sort of soft pedaled things, initially. So my given name was Andrew, and I never went by Andrew I went by Andy, and right at the beginning of transition I was going by Andi but just with an ‘i,’ which I think was—in retrospect I think was a concession just to make things easier for people. I said “well I'll be Andrea professionally, like in my publications.” And then quickly it turned out I liked Andrea much more. I still regret it actually, I think Andrea is a good name, I'm glad to have Andrea, but I know that I don't have it as a result of having really considered. I was never like “oh should I name myself whatever? June, Zoey?” You know, all of

the like—Claire? I never had a moment where I was just like, “well if I could have any name, what name would I want?” Which I have regret about. I’m glad that my name is what it is now, but I wish I had, I wish I had considered at the time ... I mean it makes things easy to have the same initials and everything. I probably would have kept the same initials in any case, but ...

O'Brien: Are your middle name and last name given?

Chu: Yes, so Long is actually, I think it’s ... my name and then my face I think produces a certain amount of ethnic confusion. Chu is a Chinese surname, my grandfather on my father’s side was from Shanghai ... basically from Shanghai, born in Zhonglu, and came over—my grandparents, or my great grandfather—I’ll actually give you the quick little story, which is: so my great grandfather was born in a village outside of Shanghai, in 1908. He comes via a nascent exchange program to Harvard, is one of the first Chinese exchange students at Harvard, is one of the first—is one of two of the first foreign admittees into the Harvard business school in 1911. He was president of the Chinese student’s association, he met my great grandmother—so his name was (Zhuting Zi?) [inaudible], her name was (Hu Bing Zha?) [inaudible] and she was at Ratcliffe, which I think was, at the time, the sister school to an all-male Harvard. And she was known as the Porsche of Cambridge, because of how many suitors she had—from *The Merchant of Venice*, the Shakespeare. So they met, she was also Chinese, they met at Harvard, or they met in Cambridge, and then went back to China. He got some kind of cushy job working for the nationalist government. He was minister of salt, and worked for Chiang Kai-Shek’s government, for such and such years. And then the communists won, and so they got out. So my shameful past is that the Chinese side of my family is nationalists [laughter]. So I think they briefly went to Taiwan and then came to the US via New York, I don’t know whether it was legal or not—actually, some version—so that was 1949 or 1950, because the communists take power in 1949—some version of the Chinese Exclusion Act was still in effect so I don’t know. I’m sure there were not a small number of nationalist refugees at the time, but anyway. That’s the Chinese side of the family.

O'Brien: And that was your father’s parents?

Chu: That was my father’s grandparents. So it was my great grandfather and great grandmother. My grandfather comes to the US, I think separately from them because he had been in college in Shanghai, and then he goes to Baylor—a mystery benefactor, whom he would later meet, pays for him to go to Baylor University. He is not a Christian, but his—or I should say, his actual mother by this time was dead, and so he had a step mother. And she was Christian, but he was not Christian. He was at Baylor which is a Christian university, he likes going to church because he likes the music, and then one night in the dorm room someone, a boy in the dorm room has a seizure, a really frightening seizure, and my grandfather falls to his knees and prays, and the seizure stops, and so he converts. My read on it now as a quote on quote scholar, is that it provided a way ... he assimilated via Christianity and Christianity sort of took the place of a sense of loyalty to Chinese culture. So that’s my father’s father. And he would meet my grandmother in Brooklyn, I think, he was working at a hospital. He was a doctor and she was a nurse. She’s some white lady from New Jersey, which like, I have no idea what it was like for this white woman to marry a Chinese guy thirteen years her senior, I have no idea

what her family thought. And then they became missionaries to Korea, which I assume is because they couldn't become missionaries to China at the time, pre-Gai Ge Kai Fang. And so the Christianity thing—so my father who is half Chinese was born on a Christian mission in Korea. So, that is all the Chinese side of the family. It translated into very little in terms of my own experience growing up. When my father is a banana, and it meant like, what? I knew what a rice cooker was. Evidently some white people grow up and they don't have rice cookers which was always weird to me. And like, and it mean that I had an interest which I pursued. I took Chinese in college, I got a minor in Chinese in college. I am probably the least Chinese-looking person of my siblings. I have three younger siblings. My sister is very dark, I think she often gets mistaken for Latina. But she's very—she's clearly not white. But I just look white, occasionally mixed people can tell, but I think I just look like a white girl, and in practice I—what I say is I'm a white Asian American, the way that you can be a white Jew. It's a kind of, it's like a species of whiteness at this point. Long—but the reason it looks like i'm more Chinese than I am is because Long looks like it's Chinese but it's not. Long is a British surname, it's my mother's mother's maiden name, which I was given for some reason. And so Andrea Long Chu sounds like—occasionally some people think my last name is Longchu, like that's my cChinese surname, but no it's all a trick and a lie. But I never changed it, I never thought about changing my middle name. Because I always liked it, because it was the basis for a very entertaining joke as a kid, which was to ask people who did not know—I can't do this joke anymore because I'm like a public figure and my name is part of my name, but—I could ask someone who did not know what my middle name was, “hey, guess my middle name,” and they would say “I can't just guess your middle name, you have to give me a hint,” and I would say “well, the hint is, my middle name is long” and they would be like “Bartholomew?” [laughter] It would separate the weak from the chaff, sort of thing. And people would get it immediately, and some people would not get it, once they had assumed that it meant the name was, itself, lengthy, just wouldn't get it. And I would say, “no, my middle name is really long” [laughter]. I just took up so much time just describing my name, it's so exciting. But I should do the last bit of it which is that all the kids in my family, the decision was made by my parents that all the boys would have new testament names and all the girls would have old testament names, and there was, growing up, just the one girl. And so, it was, the boys were Andrew, Timothy, and Silas, and the girl was Abigail. So, like, Silas, for instance, would have been Miriam had he been a girl. I have a new testament name, Andrew is one of the disciples, and of course Andrew means ‘manly,’ as just insult added to injury. And, of course, Andrea still does mean ‘manly,’ just making it feminine doesn't mean it doesn't mean ‘manly’ [laughter]. So I have a new testament greek name that means ‘man’ [laughter].

O'Brien: So the last couple of years, there has been both a growth of trans media attention and trans political popular cultural attention, but also a sort of development in trans critical writing, of which you're a part, and I would just like towards the end of our interview, just want to hear your thoughts a little bit about the development of trans studies or thought coming out of trans communities at the moment?

Chu: Yeah, I mean I—I transitioned ... what you're talking about is the thing we call, like with disdain, the tipping point. And, I came out after that, you know, I came out into that, more or

less. I mean, when did Caitlyn Jenner come out? It wasn't ... I think Caitlyn and I were not that far apart in terms of, it was just a couple months—wasn't she 2016? I don't know. And so, I had taken this trans studies class, I had been very unhappy with that class, I remember. Not because of Paisley, whom I adore, but because there tended to be trans people tend to be good examples of something—of someone's gender theory—is sort of the traditional role of the figure of the trans person since the nineties. So you know, all the *Paris is Burning* stuff and all of that was very dissatisfying. And the other thing was, of course, I, at the time, thought I was a cis person taking the class, but most of the people in the class were cis and so no one wanted to say anything, everyone wanted to just be a good ally, and it just leads—good ally-ship leads to bad scholarship [laughter]. I say that tongue-in-cheek but there was clearly like a moral orthodoxy that could be observed if one wanted to, and that was always very unappealing to me. So I came out and, you know, after this initial heady phase was this “oh this sucks, like I hate being trans, I have no idea why I would have pride about this, I have no idea why I would have love for this,” and it bothered me that I couldn't find that kind of discourse online. First of all, there's just not that many nonfiction books that are not memoirs written by trans women. I mean I don't even know, it's a small number. And most of those are very, like you know *Whipping Girl* is Julia Serano's book, is very good politics, like it's setting up “these are the terms, and this is how it works.” There's a lot of, I think ... there's still a lot of proving to other people that you're real, and proving that this is a legitimate thing, and that, I think, as I was saying before, can lead to a kind of respectability politics, even among those who would find that problematic. And I wanted a space for ... I wanted a space for talking about dysphoria, I wanted a space for talking about ... or have come to want a space for talking about, you know, being suicidal. You know it's not a—and for talking about divisions and distinctions within the trans community, like I can totally be a transexual separatist on some days, it's very frustrating to me to have a sort of homogenous wash over all different kinds of whatever-we-call so-called gender variants or something, I get frustrated that I don't have discourse for me. And, you know, I think everyone experiences that. So for instance, I say, there are some people who are trans because they want to be trans, and there are some people who are trans because they don't want to be trans. Those are wildly different experiences, and of course that's still a generalization, and of course those two positions are not mutually exclusive. And there's always more complication to be done, there are real divisions, I think, in the ways that different trans people experience the world, and there's real—and there's all of these pieties about gender identity, about how gender is a spectrum, about how gender is socially constructed, like—no none of these things mean anything, they don't refer to anything, they're just like pockets of feeling that reassure you that you belong to the correct political community, they're not actual developed positions, even if at one time they were. And so, I don't know, at some point developed a very strong urge to argue with other trans people, or especially to be argued with. I crave quality disagreement, and *On Liking Women*, this piece in n+1 came out of, in part, came out of a desire to state something strongly, provocatively, in a way that would force confrontation. Not even because I was right and other people were wrong, though of course I am right, but just because—as a way to get out of the stultifying discourses of positivity and validation and affirmation and these kind of crusted over activist discourses that you'll find online on Twitter or on Tumblr. I just really wanted—and I mean I think this is a part of, you know ... maybe the first step is dignity, or something like that, but part of affording trans people all of humanity means that there has to be space for them to be terrible to each other

[laughter]. Not just terrible in bad ways, but the idea that being trans would commit you to a particular ideological position, or ought to commit you to a particular ideological position is ridiculous, and a sort of advanced form of dehumanization. So I found myself really dissatisfied with what existed, and so I wrote something about it, and continue to write things about it.

O'Brien: Where do you hope that will lead, like breaking out of the stagnant, limited trans discourse? Like where could it open onto?

Chu: I'd like there to be ... I mean I think, it depends on sort of what field we're talking about. If we're talking about in an academic context, like there's a new theory of gender, there are newer theories. Like we don't actually—I'm like checking myself to see if this is true. I don't think we've had a meaningfully different theory of gender since Butler (Judith Butler), I mean I don't know who that would be. Not that everyone is a doctrine or a performativity person but that there are some basic parts of that that have become something you assume—I don't know, I think that we—I would like to see some essentialisms again. I think there are some, not in the sense that I think we should be biological determinists or something, but, I think there are trans experiences, I think there is really a different theory of gender that does not exist yet, which is not the one that we have—or probably several different theories—that could come out of trans experience, and be theorized by trans people. And I think that is starting, but that really will require breaking with what has, in some cases, become academic, has become a basic assumption. I think it has to, I think there really is space for doing something new. That's in an academic context. I'm really interested—in a more popular frame ... I don't know I just want to see trans people not doing stuff that has to do with gender, or that so directly has to do with their being trans. Okay, so I haven't watched *Pose*, but I am totally exhausted by the idea of having to watch *Pose*, which of course I will have to, eventually, because it just looks so woke and so, just like—there's a kind of unbearable performance of virtue and sentimentality from what I can tell. I'm just talking out of my ass because I haven't seen it, but that's what it looks like to me. And part of my frustration with that, was because—okay, whatever, Ryan Murphy has a show that's got like, whatever, five main cast trans characters or something, it's like the most trans people that you've ever had in a television show. And it's like, of course it does, because it's a by-the-ball scene, and ... not that ball scene is not a real thing, or that we shouldn't make tv shows about it, but it's kind of like—I don't know why couldn't the first show about a bunch of trans people be about, I don't know, space cowboys or something. It just kind of feels like, yeah, well, like, *Orange is the New Black* had a lot of lesbians but you literally had to go to prison to find them, you know? It just, it feels like a kind of wedging trans people into a place of needing to be a sort of inspired pioneers in gender difference, or something, which is, maybe in some cases, a very flattering form of tokenism. I think I'm being unfair to *pose* probably, but I would like to see ... I would like to see trans people not doing that, not having to constantly be kind of educational figures for how gender doesn't—or gender is not what you thought it was, or sex isn't what you thought it was. It's exhausting and it's boring, and there's just so much else that could happen, and so many other things about being trans that would be more interesting to write or make tv shows, or make—I don't know, whatever, podcasts? There's so many other kinds of cultural production that could come out of being trans than this sort of, you know, fabulousness. You know, make a show about, like—I don't know make a dark sci-fi

show about hormones or something, I would love that shit. Now I'm just making up things I really need to see in the world [laughter].

O'Brien: What has your personal life been like the last couple of years?

Chu: I have a girlfriend, we live together, she's a wonderful cis woman. She's also in my program. It's funny, you know, I have an enormous affection for butch femme. It predated transition, but that is really abiding now, and she's not like a crazy butch, you know? She has long hair, she doesn't wear makeup, it's not like something where she's extremely butch or extremely soft butch. But butch femme is sort of a relational form, not so much do you button your shirt all the way to the top? And so, you know, so we will both refer to her as my boyfriend, we will both talk about the division of household labor in terms of a gender division of labor in a way that I find extremely pleasing. Like, oh that's a boyfriend task. And I cook and she does the dishes, and I love all of that. Heterosexuality is so much better when there aren't any men in the equation. This is a wonderful secret of lesbianism, and so that's been a joy, sort of getting to explore butch femme. There are lots of wonderful things about my girlfriend, but she has just taken the wheel in terms of surgery prep, so, you know, a year ago she was researching surgeons and then sent me a whole—it was a whole document that she sent me. Not even just researching surgeons in New York, looking at “what are your options in the United States? Here are five surgeons, here is a bunch of information about them.” Her way of—I mean it was incredible because I couldn't do it if I thought about, I knew I wanted to get bottom surgery but I couldn't deal with trying to figure out how to make it happen. It was way too anxiety provoking, and so she just did it. And then has subsequently—like her way of managing, I think, her own anxiety about it is to ... is again, this sort of, a friend of mine called her an alpha caretaker. So, you know, she—on our shared google calendar, there's like a whole subset of events that are all surgery related, and I don't even know when I have pre-op and post-op appointments, like she just has totally taken care of as much of it as she possibly can, and it is just one of the most, if not the most wonderful thing anyone has ever done for me. Just, incredible. And there's a whole squad of friends who have been enlisted to, sort of, keep me company when I'm recovering in the weeks right after surgery, and she's organizing all of that. I know there's things that will happen that I don't know about yet. There's like—it's just like someone planning the best surprise birthday party you could ever have, and I'm really—you know, surgery is in four weeks, I have to just get my shit together, finish up some projects, so that I can kind of coast into surgery and then not have to worry about stuff, you know, work and writing, after—in the month or two after, and so it's just ... I don't know, it's basically going to become my, it will be like my winter vacation; because we're in November right now, it'll be at the very end of November, and then, you know, the holidays is just going to be me in bed recovering from surgery and just chilling, snow outside, christmas tree up in the house, yeah. So things are really great, and I'm very lucky.

O'Brien: Anything else you'd like to include in this interview?

Chu: Uh, not that's coming to mind. Thanks for having me.

O'Brien: Absolutely, thank you so much for doing this.

Chu: It was my pleasure.