

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

LAVENDER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

PHEDRA BENOIT

By CHLOE EASTWOOD

CHLOE EASTWOOD'S HOME, WASHINGTON, D.C., NW

14 OCTOBER 2018

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY:
LAVENDER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

NARRATOR: PHEDRA BENOIT

DATE: 14 OCTOBER 2018

INTERVIEWER: CHLOE EASTWOOD

PLACE: CHLOE EASTWOOD'S HOME, WASHINGTON, D.C., NW

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW FOCUSES ON THE BUTCH CULTURE OF BUFFALO, NY WHERE PHEDRA GREW UP AND WASHINGTON, DC WHERE THEY ATTENDED COLLEGE AND NOW LIVES. PHEDRA DISCUSSES THEIR EXPERIENCE LEARNING ABOUT BUTCH CULTURE AND ADOPTING LESBIAN, BUTCH AND TRANSMASCULINE IDENTITIES AS WELL AS ACCEPTANCE INTO BUTCH COMMUNITIES. THEY DISCUSS THE IMPORTANCE OF NON-JUDGEMENTAL FAMILIAL SUPPORT OF CHILDREN AND THE ROLE THEIR FAMILY HAD ON THEIR IDENTITIES AND WHAT THEY THINK OF IDENTITIES. THEY DISCUSS THE EXISTING BUTCH CULTURE WHICH HAS MOVED TO ONLINE PLATFORMS, INCLUDING THE BOONS IT HAS PROVIDED TO THEM AND THE STRUGGLES WHICH IT EXPERIENCES BETWEEN GENERATIONS.

INTERVIEWER'S COMMENTS

FOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THIS INTERVIEW, SEE THE CORRESPONDING BACKGROUND JOURNAL.

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INDEX TERMS

PHEDRA BENOIT; BUFFALO, NY; WASHINGTON, D.C.; BUTCH FOR BUTCH;
BUTCH FASHION CLUB; AMERICAN UNIVERSITY; GEORGE WASHINGTON
UNIVERSITY; BUTCH; LESBIAN; GENERATIONS; FAMILY; COMING OUT; LGBT

Lavender Oral History Project

*Transcription of Interview with Phedra Benoit on 14 October 2018 at Interviewer's Home in
Washington, D.C. NW*

CE: Initials of Chloe Eastwood (Interviewer)

PB: Initials of Phedra Benoit (Narrator)

CE: This is the fourteenth of October, 2018. Chloe Eastwood interviewing Phedra Benoit for the Lavender Oral History Project. Do I have your permission to record?

PB: Yes.

CE: Let's start right at the beginning. Where did you grow up?

PB: I grew up in Buffalo, New York. In the Elmwood Village, for anyone who knows. I lived there my whole life. As I said earlier, my parents are divorced so my mom lived in the city, my dad lived closer to the counties and suburbs. I moved to D.C. for college and I just graduated this past May, so I've been in D.C. for the past four years and this will be my fifth year there.

CE: What was growing up in Buffalo like?

PB: It was pretty cool. We got a lot of snow. That's kind of the biggest thing whenever I tell people that I'm from Buffalo they're like, "Oh, it's really cold up there!" and I'm like, "Yeah!" This past couple of days where it's been, like, 50 degree weather. It's so good. There's definitely a lot of snow days, which is awesome. I just like snow in general. It's the biggest thing is that it's very snowy. Buffalo is known as being the city of good neighbors, so, there's that, too. Everyone's really friendly up there. It's definitely a lot more of a family atmosphere and a lot of the neighborhoods and stuff, would have block parties and stuff like that and I feel like you always know a lot of people. Whenever I meet people down here in D.C. that're also from Buffalo, it's really cool

because we're always like, "Oh! I'm from Buffalo, too!" and you have that instant connection where you're like, "Oh, my gosh have you been to this place in Buffalo? What part of Buffalo are you from?" So, that's cool.

CE: Was your family pretty typical to that? What were they like in particular?

PB: My mom had me when she was pretty young, so my mom was one of the youngest parents throughout my graduating class. I was not a planned baby, to say the least. She had me when she was twenty and then she had my sister when she was twenty-one or twenty-two, I think, so two kids before she was twenty-three, which is kind of crazy. Growing up, I feel like my family was pretty normal, but I also feel like that's how most people say their families are. I have seven sisters, so there's always people around. I've always babysat and taken care of my younger sisters, so that's a part of my life. And my sisters and I all went to different schools, which I think is also interesting because I feel like most kids all go to the same school. [3 MINUTES] Everything was, kind of normal. My parents are divorced. So. My sisters are split up between them.

CE: Does everybody see everybody at different times?

PB: That's interesting. I only have one sister who's between my mom and my dad, that we're full sisters and the rest of my sisters are half-sisters. So my youngest sisters that I have right now have not met the rest of my sisters. So, I definitely have sisters that have never met each other before because they just grew up in very different households and my mom and my dad do not get along so they just don't see each other very often. So their kids, obviously, don't see each other very often, either.

CE: Do you find that you spend a lot of time with them? Or not so much now that you've move here? Or?

PB: Now that I've moved to D.C. I definitely don't see my family very often. When I was, I think fourteen or fifteen, we stopped going to my dad's house regularly because my dad got remarried and had a couple kids with his new wife and her and I always got along really well but my sister and her do not get along very well at all and I had much closer ties to my sister than I did to my dad. So we stopped going over there.

We used to go over there, like, once a week. One week-day, like a Wednesday and every other weekend. And it became more like we'd just see him every once in a while when we had the time and wanted to and were like, "Hey, like, let's get dinner somewhere," or like, "Could we come over and say 'Hi'?" And I think as soon as that happened it was very much, like, my dad and my step mom created their own family and now every time I go over there it's kind of weird because my step mom is always very nice but she's almost like [affected voice] "No you're the guest," and it's weird because I'm the guest in my dad's house, which is kind of strange. I definitely spent more time at my mom's house growing up than my dad's.

CE: This question might be a bit, like, complicated because you have two different households, but how would you describe the financial situation in your family as you were growing up?

PB: I can describe my dad's situation a little bit better. So, growing up I was always very aware whenever I was with my dad that we didn't have very much money. I remember when I was in first grade there was an entire winter when he couldn't pay to have hot water, so we took cold showers. We moved around a lot when I was with my dad. And I think that those memories of my childhood are so strong because -- those are the ones I remember the most, my childhood memories of my dad are what I remember more than my mom -- because they always changed. With my mom, I think in like '99 or something, we moved into this big beautiful house in the city and me and my sister each had our own room. So, it was definitely like very opposite in that. It seemed like my mom had a lot more money than my dad did. [6 MINUTES] And now it's not necessarily opposite, but I feel like it's probably pretty evened out. My dad's mom died recently and -- not too recently, like two years ago -- and so since then he got a ton of money from her. And then they've been kind of -- him and my step mom have been budgeting better recently, so I guess they're not poor. But they still live in a house in the country and it's the same house that they've lived in at least since I was in third grade. So, they've lived in that same house, it's just they've put an addition onto it and they don't have well water anymore. So, it's just the same house, it just has upgrades. So, it's a little bit nicer.

CE: During this time while you were growing up, were there any instances that you found where you realized, "In me, maybe I'm not straight?" Did you ever find any of those maybe childhood moments where you didn't necessarily have the words for it, maybe did have the words for it?

PB: I think growing up, looking back now. Things that I did when I was younger I can definitely see some things, but that was just nothing that crossed my mind. I was definitely boy crazy up until, like, seventh grade. Which, I think, is really funny because men I find repulsive now. But when I was little -- I guess I'm trying to think of specific things. Whenever I'd have sleepovers with friends, I'd be like, "Oh my gosh, like, we should kiss!" And in my head I was like, "That's normal," and that's just friends being -- gals being gals and it's just, like, whatever.

But then, I think, the turning point for me where I kind of started to realize for I might like women, when I was in between seventh and eighth grade my friend was a Girl Scout and so she brought me with her to Girl Scout overnight camp and I remember very distinctly that my camp councilor's name was Bubbles because they have weird names that're -- don't give out the real names of the councilors and she had short blonde hair and she was super cool and I was like, "Wow she's so cute!" And I was like, "This is weird! Why do I think that she's cute?" And there was also, at the camp there was--I don't know if the person was a butch, or a trans guy, but definitely a more masculine AFAB person. And that was kind of like the first, like AFAB person that was masculine-ish that I'd ever seen. So. That, I think, kind of brought a lot of things to the forefront of, like, "Oh, maybe I like women."

One thing that I forgot to mention is that I have great-aunts who are gay that I knew were gay growing up. But I'd -- because that's just how it had always been, I was like, "It doesn't--there--it's the same." [9 MINUTES] I don't think that I realized that being gay was something that was different until middle school. Seventh grade. Girl Scout Camp. Turning point. [LAUGHTER]

CE: Present-day, how is it that you identify now?

PB: Right now I identify as a trans-masculine, non-binary butch person. Which is a lot of labels to put in there. I identified as non-binary at first when I was, like, "Hmm, gender?" I identified as gender non-conforming or gender fluid. I was dating a man at the time, which is a bad decision. But I was starting to play with they/them pronouns. I had been using a binder every once in a while, mostly for cosplay, which is, like, whatever. I was a huge nerd. And whenever I would cosplay as these male characters, I felt really awesome and I was like, "Wow!" Having a flat chest and being a guy, I was like, "This is cool!" I'd pretend that I'm a guy. And then I kind of realized that I could pretend to be a guy all the time. And so when I was--I think it was when I was, like, a

sophomore in college was when I started kind of being more, like, wearing a binder more often, playing around with wearing men's clothes more often, and then when I was a junior in college is when I really was starting to come out to people. I was using they/them pronouns and being non-binary.

And then, I think for a long time growing up, getting to the butch part of my identity, I always kind of associated being butch with being fat and ugly and that's terrible, but that's the image that I had in my mind and it took a lot for me to destigmatize that. And to recognize that: A) not all butch-identifying people are ugly, B) most butch-identifying people are not ugly, C) just because you're fat doesn't mean that you're ugly. It was just a lot of internalized things that had a lot of body image issues. I have really hairy legs and growing up that was a really big thing for me. I always had to shave my legs and then when I was being a man I was like, "I need to shave my legs all the time, I need to shave my bikini line all the time, shave my armpits all the time," and it became a really, really intense feeling of dysphoria, but I didn't have the words for that yet, so I was like, "What's wrong with me? I hate myself." [12 MINUTES] From just having to shave all the time, and I think when I stopped shaving, which is just a weird thing, but I was like, "Wow, I have literally found heaven." Knowing that I didn't have to shave was like, "Ah!" Iconic.

And my partner that I have currently when I first started talking to them, they were like, "Oh, yeah, like, I'm butch!" and I was like "Oh! Like, that's interesting! You're not how I would picture butch people to be normally." So then I started learning more about butches and I--they told me that their favorite book was *Stone Butch Blues* and so I read it to impress them. And reading through it, it takes place in Buffalo, NY, which I think is really cool because that's where I grew up. So then, reading it I was like, "Wow, I know where this place is!" When I was reading it over winter breaks, I would read a chapter of the book and then go to the place in Buffalo where it happened and I was like, "This is so cool!" And then I learned more. There's like this--there's another oral history called *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, and that also takes place in Buffalo, NY, so reading that, too, is really interesting because growing up in Buffalo, not realizing that it has such a strong butch history there is -- I keep wanting to go back now to be like, "Oh, like, this is where, like, this happened," and, like, "This is where that happened." And it's definitely a sense of pride now to be like, "Yeah, I'm from Buffalo where all these butches are from." So I think having--I don't know if maybe having all of these books and stuff take place in Buffalo kind of made me be like, "Being butch is okay!" Or seeing other butches that looked like me. And just having more knowledge of it and knowledge of the history of the butch identity I think definitely made me more accepting of it and accepting of it as an identity for myself and once I started to buy it like, "Yeah I'm butch," made sense. And it was it was very powerful to me to be, like, [whisper] "That's me, I'm butch!"

CE: You mentioned before a few things that being butch wasn't and a little about your process, what does it mean now for you to say, "Yes, I'm Butch?"

PB: In a weird way, I think it kind of means a lot of the same things. It means that you're masculine, you don't, --or not necessarily masculine, I guess, but defy a lot of gender roles that are placed on women in general. I think it's also kind of tricky being a gender non-conforming individual who also identifies as butch. Because sometimes there's a lot of transphobia in the butch community. [15 MINUTES] Which is interesting. Considering that -- all these people are, not necessarily rebels, but going against the grain, so to speak, from traditional heteronormative culture in general. So, kind of like that.

And then, for me, specifically me and my friends, we're very much like, "We're tough!" and whatever. My roommate is high femme, so every time she's like, [sweetie voice] "Can you hold this for me?" I'm like, "Yeah, sure, whatever. I can pick this up for you and carry it around for you." Yesterday, she got a chair that she wanted to put into our living room, and she's like, [sweetie voice] "Can you help me carry it upstairs?" And I'm like, "Sure." And then I just carried it by myself. She's like, "I thought when I said, 'Can you help me?' we'd both be carrying it." I was like, "Oh, no, no, no. You want help? I'll just do it. Because I can." There's no sense -- Doing things that are typical man tasks, like building furniture and chopping wood, whenever I'm doing them like, "Ah, God, yeah, I feel so butch right now!" Which, [laughter] is just really funny, but so totally how I am. Me and my roommate--or, not my roommate, my friend who's dating my roommate--has this street sign that says "Lavender Mist Rd" on it, and so they took a picture of that sign and our butch outfits and we're all just like, [tough voice] "Oh, yeah! We're tough, we're butches!" Take very serious pictures, make us look very sexy and masc. or whatever. And. Yeah, so I guess that's what being butch means for me.

CE: I'm actually going skip a few questions and we'll come back to them. Since we're on the sort of gender topic already, have you ever felt like you were supposed to perform one set of gender expectations? Either as growing up being in the straight community or now that you've explored a few different spaces within the LGBT community, have you noticed different expectations of you, gender-wise in the spaces? You touched a bit ago on the transphobia between butch communities and trans-masc. communities. But if there are any other nuances that you want to go into?

PB: Growing up, I think the biggest thing for me was that I not a skinny kid growing up; I was kind of chubby. And everyone in my family was really skinny, so I was the odd, weird, fat kid. And that was really tough growing up. So, I think that kind of played into part of it. Just my body itself was more masculine than the other women in my family. And my mom was really beautiful. And she was really hairy, too. [18 MINUTES] But she had this offset of being -- she had this beautiful, black hair and she was really thin and had long fingers and whatever. I am so self-conscious of my stubby hands. I think growing up, specifically, the whole shaving thing was really, really tough for me. And not having to shave and totally accepting the fact that I'm hairy and that's okay was a [sigh of relief] huge turning point for me. I never am going to go back. So that was a big thing.

Specifically, transphobia in the butch community. I'm a part of this Facebook page called Butch Fashion Club and it's really awesome. And there might be some things sometimes where people, especially older butches will say some things and I'm just like, "That -- Just--." There was this whole thing with makeup one time where they were like, [authoritative voice] "If you wear makeup you're not butch! Blahblahblahblah!" I'm like, "Okay, but men can wear makeup and they're still men, so why can butches not wear makeup?" And then someone was trying to be like, "Wearing makeup as a butch person is not non-conforming because you're already non-conforming as a butch person." I was like, "Okay, but I think that that's wrong. And I think that you can let people live and do whatever they want." [laughter] So, I think specifically in a lot of these online groups there's a lot of policing of people's identities. And then so, off of Butch Fashion Club, there used to be a Facebook page called Butch for Butch that has since been torn down because the original the Butch for Butch Facebook page was really awesome because it was a space for butches who loved other butches who, like--It's just so heart-warming and people will post pictures of their weddings and I post pictures of me and my partner who both identify as butch and it's just really cute and gay. But, the description of the Facebook page--like, I don't know, the "About" thing?--was like, "This is a female-only group," but then it had some vague things about saying that trans-men were allowed into it, which was interesting. And then someone made--it had a lot of "she, she, she" pronouns in it. And the--just the first words of "This is a female-only group," so, like, [contemplative voice] "Well, not everyone in here identifies as female." But, so, someone made a post that was very tame, and she's like, "Just wondering if, like, the admins can make the description of this group a little bit more gender-inclusive to--because there're some people that don't identify as women, but also identify as butch." And I commented on it like, "Oh my gosh, yeah, as a non-binary person who also identifies as butch, this would be so awesome!" And then, someone else posted, commented on it, was like, "What about trans women who are butches? Are they allowed here? Because I'm butch and my partner is butch, but she's a trans-woman." [21

MINUTES] And I was like, "Oh my god!" I don't see why they -- I was like, "I can only speak for myself on this comment string, but trans-women can totally be butches." And so can trans guys, I think, because the whole thing is that, with trans-men, it's tricky because like, "Oh, yeah, they're a guy, so they can't be butch." But also they might have once identified as a butch person and then transitioned into being a trans-man, so are they not allowed in the community anymore? So, I thought that was interesting. But then one of the admins was like, "Oh we're blocking comments for now on this common page, admins can't deal with it right now." And I was like, "Okay? That seems dramatic." And then someone else commented--someone else, like one of the admins made a Facebook page, or--made a whole thing on the Facebook page and was like, "I'm done with this identity policing and I just wanted a space for Butches for Butches. I guess we can't have that because people--because I can't keep track of everyone's identities," and all this stuff. And I was like, "Woahoahoahoah, I think that all we were asking for was the description of the Facebook page to include gender-inclusive language, which is not hard to do and we weren't being aggressive about it. We were just having a conversation, which was tame and we weren't calling anyone out. We weren't being aggressive or mean about it. But then, all of these comments were like, "Oh my gosh, I hate identity policing, all these identity politics. We get it you might be a trans-guy but you're really female. You're born female, and so you're female." And then I was like, "Hmm, what--but, what about intersex people? Are they not allowed to be butch? And it was just a whole thing. And it was mostly older butches that were very much against--not necessarily against, I don't think, but were very un-lenient towards allowing gender-inclusive language to be in the description on a Facebook page. And then, the admins, I think, were just like, [melodramatic voice] "Oh my God this is too much work! And we're being called out for being transphobic!" It was like, "Yeah? Own up to it and fix it? Instead of deleting the Facebook page? Like?" So, the Facebook page got deleted because the admins were sad that we called them out for being transphobic. So, I'm in the works of trying to figure out how to make a new one and--but I--if I do make a new one, because I loved the Butch for Butch Facebook page, because it's a really good space for butches who also love other butches, but if I do make a new space I want to be very clear in the description, like, "This is a gender-inclusive group for butches who love other butches, regardless of your gender identity. TERFs [trans-exclusionary radical feminists] not allowed!" [laughter] So--oh, so, how do you, get TERFS to not be there? But yeah. That's kind of--it was interesting because that's the first and only time that I've ever seen transphobic things in the butch community. [24 MINUTES]

The only other things that I've seen that are about identity is that in--so, this is also the second Butch for Butch Facebook page. The first one got deleted. I don't know why. But, it was another-- There was another dramatic-- The admin there was like,

[distraught voice] "This is too much work! I'm struggling!" And I was like, "Okay? Calm down." But there was a lot of things in that were like, [mock-harsh voice] "Femmes are bad! Femmes terrorize us butches, blahblahblahblah! I'll never be with-- If you let a femme into your bed then you're terrible!" And I was like, "This is a lot of yikes." And a lot of that particular instance to me was-- There's a lot of misogyny in the butch community, which also, I think, comes from older butches.

CE: Alright, I've got a follow-up question on that. What--would you mind being a little more specific about the relation between the butch community and the femme community and anybody who's maybe in between?

PB: So, there's the two Facebook pages, and so Butch Fashion Club definitely was more inclusive of femmes and there were femmes who were members of Butch Fashion Club because they had butch partners or they liked butches. So, that's kind of like they were there to appreciate butch fashion. Which is cute. But then, Butch for Butch was-- It's very interesting because I am someone who is not romantically attracted to femmes mostly. I'm mostly attracted to butches, but I'm also not like, [authoritative voice] "Down with the femmes!" But, it felt like a lot of the butches in Butch for Butch were very much like, "Femmes are terrible!" Which was very interesting to me and very strange, especially considering that's kind of--

My friend would show me a podcast sometimes of a butch who--I don't remember her name--who was like, "Well we have to say 'thank you' to our femmes because we wouldn't exist without having femmes," and I was like, "That's an interesting take." I don't know, necessarily, if that's true, but I know that you always need something to compare something to compare something to. There's that, I guess. But, yeah, there was a lot of, like, butches that were very angry about femmes and not being--I think, part of it might be that in--and I only know from reading *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, that in older, like, fifties, sixties, and seventies, butch-femme communities people who were butch and also liked other butches were not normally welcomed into the same spaces as butches and femmes. [27 MINUTES] So, I don't know if maybe that's part of it that. There are these butches who have been maybe not allowed into butch-femme spaces or typical butch spaces because they liked other butches? So, I don't know if that has something to do with it, but there were a lot of them that were very angry about femmes, which I thought was really weird. [laughter]

CE: Do you find that divide also splits between older butches and the younger butches? Or do you think it's multi-generational?

PB: That one, I think, might be multi-generational. I couldn't--I can't super tell, just because I don't know everyone on Butch for Butch. It seemed like it was mostly older people, but there were definitely some younger looking people that were like, "I only stay with butches," and, like, "Femmes have ruined my life!" [laughter] Which is just like, [concerned voice] "Maybe you just--maybe it's not that they were a femme. Maybe they were just a terrible person." [laughter] So. I wouldn't know.

CE: And what do you personally think about these communities?

PB: I think that they definitely need some work. I think that there's a lot of issues with them in that there's a lot of-- There're definitely some generational divides between butches, which I think is really interesting because I feel like a lot more of the younger butches are butches who also identify as gender non-conforming, which I think is really interesting because in a lot of the older butches, they're like, "No you're not a trans-guy. I'm just I'm a woman who is butch." Which, I think is really interesting that there's that generational difference. But because of that, I think that there--in these butch spaces--in these butch spaces that can be an issue and things like that come up. The older butches are like, "You're not respecting us blahblahblahblah." And we're like, "No, we just want basic human decency, please."

And then, there are also really, really wonderful things about both of these clubs. Being in Butch for Butch was really awesome because I got to see older Butch for Butch couples, which is really cool and in Butch Fashion Club, there are so many older butches, more older butches than I've ever seen. And being able to see an older butch is incredible as a young butch because I get to be like, "Wow, like, I get to be like that someday. I get to be an old butch that young butches get to look up to." And seeing the older butches that're like, "Here I am!" And, like, "My tie!" Or, like, "My cowboy hat!" And then I'll be like, "I'm going to go get a cowboy hat because that older butch has a cowboy hat." It's just very cool and it's a very good sense of community that I never had before. And I think that that's something that's really important because growing up I never had butch people to look up to and know that, like, "Oh butch people exist." [30 MINUTES] And now I'm like, "There are older butch people that exist." My partner kind of has been dealing a lot with this and said it really well in that they're a younger butch and they are from Iowa, so they did not have a lot of gay people to look

up to growing up at all and they mentioned that seeing older butches was, like, "I actually have, like, a future." Which is something that previously they didn't know that they would have because--yeah. So. That part of it is really, really cool because it's like, you have people that you can look up to, that you can ask advice for, that are there for you and are, like, "Yeah, I went through that same struggle when I was your age and this is how I dealt with it." So. That part of it is really, really cool.

CE: Is the group--or groups--Butch for Butch and Butch Fashion Club, are those both D.C. based or are those across the country?

PB: They're across the world. So, what I've noticed in Butch Fashion Club is that there are a ton. The main countries that people are from are; United States, England, there's a ton from Australia, and there are quite a few that are from Sweden and Finland and stuff. But those are-- Oh, and there's a few from Berlin, I think. But those are the main ones.

CE: Is there a physical space parallel to this community in D.C.?

PB: No, but there's-- Someone recently made a post that was just their outfit or whatever, and they were like, "Also if anyone's in D.C. let me know!" And so there have been-- There'll be meetups sometimes. Right now, we're trying to plan a Butch Fashion Club D.C. branch and we called it Butches Who Brunch. So, we're trying to put that into the works. It's just a matter of finding a date where mostly everyone's available. So there's definitely--It's really cool because there you can see the butches in your area and then you get to meet them, and so that's kind of cool. But there's not necessarily a physical space where we all meet up. But there'll be, every once in a while like, "Oh, let's have a D.C. meetup from Butch Fashion Club." So that's cool.

CE: And then, within the larger LGBT community, do you have any spaces or have you had any spaces for LGBT solidarity?

PB: Yes. So, this is going slightly off track, but I am an amateur drag king. And I love it. And it is the coolest thing that I've ever done. And the first drag show that I ever went to, the first drag king show was with pretty boy drag, which is the only group in

D.C. [33 MINUTES] And so they have this thing called Amateur Night where you can sign up to do a performance if you're an amateur drag king and they invite you into their space and they'll do a tutorial for you and they're super supportive. And drag king culture is really interesting because I feel like it's a lot more inclusive: there are Butches that do drag, there are femmes that do drag, there are cis women that do drag that are straight. But it's definitely a very queer space. And that, I think-- Being in that physical space was the first time that I went to a pretty boy drag show, I was like, "This is incredible! I have never been in a space where I've seen so many people that look like me!" And in such a space that's so gender-defying. And it's very interesting to see the differences between drag queens and drag kings. But now that I've been in a couple of the Amateur Night shows, a lot of the drag kings--not necessarily know me, but will recognize me sometimes, and so they'll be like, "Oh, hey, what's up?" And one thing that I think is funny is I don't know any of their real names, but we all only know each other's drag persona names, so if we see each other in real life, it's like, "Oh, hello, Major Tom, how are you?" And I'm like, "Hi, what's up?" So that, I think, is really funny. It's an interesting part of drag king culture. I've noticed that we don't call each other by our given names, we call each other by our drag king names.

CE: And that's your name? Major Tom?

PB: Yeah. [laughter]

CE: You mentioned being really into butch fashion and I was wondering if we could go into that a little bit more?

PB: Sure.

CE: What, to start off easy, what has your experience been like going clothes shopping?

PB: Tough.

CE: Not so easy?

PB: [laughter] Yeah. My biggest thing right now has been being able to find pants that a) fit me b) make me feel good, which has been difficult, mostly because I'm a larger-ish person. And a lot of stores like Gap, I think, I'd be able to find fantastic jeans that fit me well there and they have a little bit more of a masculine style, so I feel like I'd be able to pull that off really well, but their store only goes up to a size twelve or fourteen, I think, which is annoying because I'm definitely a size sixteen or eighteen, depending on the store and depending on the brand, depending on the style, the moon, whatever.

Recently, I've been exclusively shopping for jeans at Old Navy. What's cool about Old Navy is that they have a ton of different styles in women's jeans. So I have been getting a lot-- [36 MINUTES] I've been trying to figure out what style of jeans a) fits me best and b) makes me feel more butch when I'm wearing them. I tried wearing straight-leg jeans for a while, but I think that since my butt and my hips are a little bit large and curvaceous, that wearing straight-leg jeans emphasizes that a little bit more. And so I've just stuck with wearing skinny jeans because I feel like I can do a little bit more with that and I feel more comfortable in skinny jeans. Shirts, I just go to Old Navy for everything. It's really kind of sad. My entire wardrobe right now is exclusively Old Navy and thrift stores. But the Old Navy's men's section is fantastic. They have their-- I feel like when I was first starting to look for button-downs and stuff that would fit me, that were in the men's section that looked cool, a lot of the times they'd be really tight on your hips because they're built for a man's frame which is straight instead of a woman's frame that has hips on it. So, that was something that was difficult for me, but a lot of the Old Navy men's shirts are a little bit looser fitting and so they don't stay super straight. Or if they stay super straight they're a little bit shorter so they cut off right before your hips so you don't really have that much of an issue with it. That's been really awesome because I get a ton of my-- I have a lot of shirts and button-downs and flannels and stuff that I've gotten from there that definitely fit with my butch wardrobe and are on the legit and are good. One thing about butch fashion that was really hard for me was I started a more professional job over the summer and so trying to find business casual clothes that were also masculine was really hard. Or interview appropriate clothes that were masculine was really difficult.

Particularly because trying to find pants that were professional but also fit me was really hard to find. I found one pair of khakis from Old Navy that fit me that looked good that were professional and I bought five pairs in different colors [laughter] that I was like, "We're good, we're done, don't have to ever have to buy them ever again." Just because that was such a big struggle this summer was trying to find khaki pants. And it's interesting because I feel for bigger butch people, it kind of depends on how comfortable you are in your masculine identity. I am still trying to be okay with a lot of

different parts of my masculine identity and one thing is men's pants are really long in the crotch because "Oh, yeah, men--big dicks." And I'm like, "Not me. Don't have one." [laughter] That's not something that. I remember making a post for Butch Fashion Club and I was like, [39 MINUTES] "I really like Old Navy pants but they have a huge crotch and that makes me uncomfortable." And one of the butches was like, "Embrace the big crotch in the men's pants!" And I was like, "Good for you for being able to do that, but I'm definitely not at that point right now." And kind of delving into a little not-safe-for-work area, just wearing a dildo and stuff like that gives me almost the same amount of dysphoria as having tits does, which I think is really interesting because a lot of my friends who are butch and transmasculine are like, "Wow, I love wearing a strap-on or having a packer!" And it makes me really uncomfortable and I do not like that. I'm very much like, "No. Do not have a dick down there at all." Which, I think, is maybe an interesting just me thing.

We were talking about butch fashion and I started talking about strap-ons.

CE: Well, are there any other ways that you find that you split from the main trend or the main community?

PB: I guess the biggest thing is that, particularly with pants, just because that has been such a hard thing for me growing up, being able to find pants that fit, too, is skinny jeans have worked well for me for a really long time and I feel like not a lot of butches wear skinny jeans. Especially bigger butches that have the similar body type as me, they usually wear straight-leg jeans or they wear men's jeans. And I just have not found-- I keep trying to find men's jeans that fit me well, because I'm like, "Other butches that look like me wear them and they look great on them," but then when I put them on I'm like, "I feel like a loser." So. I haven't been able to find a pair that I like yet.

CE: Let me ask you how your relationship with your own gender and gender identity, the way that you present, the way that you feel-- You've mentioned that some butches date other butches and some butches date other femmes-- Is there any way that you've felt that your gender identity or the people that you're attracted to have influenced one or the other?

PB: This, I think, is something that's really important for me, is that my partner and I have very similar gender identities and very similar gender expressions. When I

personally date someone, I usually tend to--not necessarily morph into them, but I take a lot of their characteristics and stuff like that. When I first started dating my partner, I was starting to come out as using they/them pronouns and they were also starting to come out as using they/them pronouns so we were doing that together almost. [42 MINUTES] But it's important for me now, knowing that I identified as non-binary before I dated them because if I had identified as non-binary after dating them, I would never know if it was like, "Am I doing this just because I'm dating someone who's also non-binary, or is it because I'm actually non-binary?" So whenever I'm having doubts about it, I'm like, "You identified as non-binary far before you met your partner." And so that's something that's important to me.

I think as far as expression goes, I definitely became more butch after dating my partner. And I think a lot of that was because they helped me be really okay with being masculine. It's funny because again, going back to the whole "big butch" thing, the really manly butches, I was like, "Oh, that'll never be me," but my partner is like, "Oh my god, that butch is so cute!" And it'll be the really big, masculine butch. And then I heard one of my other friends one time talk about how she--she's bisexual, but she has a lot of different variations in people that she dates and stuff, so she's like, "Oh my gosh, every time I see a chunky butch, I'm just like, 'Ah! Marry me! Wife me up!'" Which I think is so interesting because I feel like maybe I'm one of those chunky butches, so to say, that I wouldn't personally ever be attracted to, but it's very weird to be like, "Someone thinks that I'm attractive!" Which, is interesting. But knowing that my partner was into that, I don't know, maybe that was part of it. I'm definitely a lot more comfortable with myself and the way that I dress than I ever have been. Being able to dress more masculine and in button downs has really helped me be okay with me.

I know that growing up, I was known for mix-matching clothing, wearing a lot of really bright colors and different patterns, like I would wear dresses over jeans and I'd wear shirts underneath my spaghetti-strap dresses and for school spirit week when we'd have mix-and-match day my friends would joke that I'd come to school actually matching in clothes. And I think a really big part of that is that I was trying to dress in a way-- because I knew in some subconscious form that I wasn't supposed to dress like other people and I wanted to be different and I knew that I was different, but I didn't know how. So I dressed as weirdly and strangely as I could so that people would be like, "Oh, Phedra dresses differently than everybody else that I know." And now knowing that, I think I was just looking for a different type of dress and like to look more masculine, has definitely helped me to be like, "I don't have to wear seven different patterns." [45 MINUTES] Sometimes I still do, but I definitely--My wardrobe has definitely toned down a little bit since ninth grade. And that I'm no longer wearing crazy patterns and all that stuff. I think mostly because I'm just a lot more comfortable in what I'm wearing and I was never really comfortable in typical girl clothes back then.

CE: You mentioned that you have had a development within your relationship and personal development. How many people have you dated before this latest relationship?

PB: I've had two serious-ish relationships before this person. I have dated people throughout high school, but it was never really serious, it was like how you date people in middle school, but I was in high school. It's like you date for a week and then you break up and you date another person for a week and break up. It was very low key. When I was a-- Like even between junior and senior year, I started dating this girl and she was terrible and gave me a lot of really bad things like anxiety and stuff to the point where there was a month where I lost like thirty pounds because I just had such bad anxiety that I was eating away at me. I still deal with a lot of anxiety and depression things. That relationship has caused me a lot of bad mental health issues. But then after that, because our breakup was so terrible, and that relationship was so terrible, I was like, "I don't want to ever be in a relationship again. I don't ever want to ever love again."

So, I remember making a Tumblr post that was like, "I just need a gay to kiss," and then this guy commented on it, "Does it have to be a gay?" And I was like, "Fuck it, whatever. I guess not. I'll date a guy if-- That's what I'll do." And I firmly believe-- I dated him for two and a half years and I wish so badly that I could take those two and a half years back because he was such a loser. In the biggest sense of the word, like he lived in his parents' basement, worked at a Dairy Queen that he got fired from. Just totally-- And me being in college and being successful, we're in two completely different life paths and we just met completely by chance online and then started dating. But he was what I wanted at the time. I thought that I was going to marry him. I was like, "Wow, he's so good to me, blahblahblah." In this cloud. [48 MINUTES] And I firmly believe that the only reason I started dating him was because my first relationship was so fucked that I was like, "Any kind of kindness or basic human decency is love." And so I was like, "Wow, this kid's paying attention to me, nobody will ever pay attention to--" Like, the first relationship I had definitely caused some issues with me being like, "I'm unlovable." So, the first chance that someone loved me, I was like, "Oh my gosh! We must be together forever because nobody else will ever love because you're the only other person that will ever love me!" But he was really terrible and after a while, since we were really long distance--he lived in Canada and I lived in D.C. throughout college--he was like, "I think that I'm polyamorous and I want to sleep with other people while you're in D.C. because we're long distance and I don't get to have sex all the time." And I was like, "That makes me really uncomfortable. Please don't do that." And he did it

anyway. And it got to a point where I was just depressed all the time and he was having sex with all these people, so it was like, "Bye." Then I broke up with him. Well, like. Oh. This is a whole thing. So we were broken up. In my mind we were dead. He was like, "Let's just take a break." And I was like, "Okay."

And then I met my current partner like two weeks later and I've never spoken to him ever again. First few relationships were not great in any sense of the word. And then my current partner is like Heaven on Earth. They're lovely.

CE: How did you meet?

PB: So they played for the A.U. women's rugby team and I played for the G.W. women's rugby team and our teams used to be really close and we'd have parties all the time together. So there was a Halloween party where we were both at and we met each other there through a mutual friend. I was dressed up in a pea pod onesy, but everyone thought that I was a dinosaur so I'd go around like, "No, this is my stem and this is my leaf." I'd point them out on my head. And they were dressed up as a member of a boy band. Not any particular boy band, just a boy band in general. They had those crazy curly long hair that the-- not super long, but ear length long--that they had wrapped up in a bandana and they were wearing a very 80's windbreaker. Total, total dork, but I was like, "Wow, they're so hot." So, we started talking at this Halloween party and for the next few months we would go on "dates," but I was not sure if they were dates, but we'd hold hands and sometimes we'd kiss. And I was like, "Oh my gosh, that's so cute!" And then over winter break, we were talking some more and then eventually they were like, "Do you want to go on dates but actually call them dates?" And I was like, "Yes." And so then we were started dating officially. Yep. [51 MINUTES] [laughter]

CE: And within relationships, either your current one or in general, how do you express love to your partner? And how do you receive love?

PB: Expressing love, I definitely give a lot. I'm always offering to give them gifts or buy them dinner and I do a lot of that kind of thing where I like to give a lot of my love. I also like to cuddle and be around them. How I like to receive love is very much-- especially with my first relationships being so bad--I need a lot of reaffirmations that I am loved and so my partner being like, "Yes, I love you!" Vocalizing it a lot is really helpful for me. This is something funny. I was talking about this with my partner the

other day. I, in dates and stuff, really prefer--Or not necessarily prefer, but I really like going on adventures and spending quality time together. We recently moved in together, so they have been--Recently, we don't go on dates as much anymore and I really miss that part of our relationship. But they've been like, "Well, it's because I see you every time when I come home." Like, "Yeah, but that's different than going out to a museum together or something." And like, "But I don't have time for that." And I'm like, "Well, you used to have time for that. So, why don't you have time anymore?" And so that's just something that we've been working on and trying to navigate that is that I very much like to spend quality time with my partner.

CE: I'm going to pivot. So the first question will be a little bit of a tangent, but then I'm going to bring it back around. How would you describe your relationship with your home family when you were first coming out?

PB: Okay. First coming out as a lesbian, well, first coming out as bisexual was a little bit rough with my mom. We were on the car ride to school when I was a freshman in high school. I was like, "Yeah, Mom, I think I'm bi." My mom was like, "Phedra, you can't be bisexual, you're just sexual." And I was like, "I don't even know what that means. I've never had sex with anyone, I've never kissed anyone before. What?" So that was rocky. But then once I started dating girls a little more regularly, I was like, "Yeah, Mom." Oh, I think my mom was like, "Is she your girlfriend?" And I was like, "Yeah." And my mom was like, "Phedra, I know that you're gay." And I was like, "Okay, Mom, thank you." [54 MINUTES] So it was fine. My mom's totally chill with me being gay. My dad was like, "Wow, I've known for so long!" And I was like, [sarcastic] "Of course you have. Whatever."

And then coming out as non-binary was and is still very tough. I didn't want to come out to my mom for a really long time and I was kind of forced to come out as non-binary. I dipped the waters of being like, "Yeah, my partner's non-binary." And my mom was like--I'm using they/them pronouns for them in a conversation was like, "Oh, they're really cool. This is what they do." Using they/them pronouns. Mom was like, "Waitwaitwaitwaitwait. Are you dating one person, or are you gang raping?" And I was like, "Ahh! What are you talking about? That doesn't make any sense! In any sense of the word. Complete-- Not even a normal response to hearing they/them pronouns. I was like, "That doesn't make any sense. Why is that the first thing that you think of?" So I obviously got really upset and my mom sent me a really long letter and was like, "I'm really sorry, I just don't know a lot. You're going to have to teach me." And typical family things about transgender things. And I was like, "Okay." Over

winter break, my senior year, I think, I came home and my sister was home. My sister's a little bit weird. But she had thrown out that she had ADD for a while and she never told my mom about it, but she was telling my mom over winter break was her coming out to her mom that she had ADD. My mom has really bad stigmas against mental illness and things and so when Rene was like, "Oh, yeah, I've got ADD." My mom was like, "Yeah, but Rene, people just have a hard time with things, in general, blahblahblahblah." And then my mom whipped her head totally-- I was just hanging out in the kitchen while they're having this heated conversation. My mom was mad at my sister, so she had to be mad at me about something, so she whipped her head around, she was like, "When are you going to tell me that you're transgender or whatever?" And was very mad. And I was like, "Ahh! What? How would you even know about that? Blahblahblah!" And I found out the reason that she found out was because I'm very vocal about it on Instagram. One of my aunts follows me on Instagram. It was an aunt that I thought that I could confide things in and obviously I cannot, but I made a post one time that was like, "I don't feel like I'll ever be able to come out to my mom because my mom has made transphobic comments about my partner who uses they/them pronouns, blahblahblah." And so my mom, in the middle of this conversation that originally started as my sister telling my mom that she had ADD was now about me not telling my mom that I was non-binary and that she was like, "How dare you say that this is not a welcoming place that you could come out to." And I was like, "Well, I don't feel very welcomed right now that you're yelling at me and I've come out to you. [57 MINUTES] This is exactly what I thought would happen if I had to come out to you." So that was definitely a rocky start. It's gotten a little bit better since then. My entire family has tried to use they/them pronouns for me my partner at the very least, which I appreciate. Some of them have started they/them pronouns for me and that's been really cool. My mom still very much, though, does not use they/them pronouns for me or my partner, which I think is really weird because my step-dad uses them, my dad uses them, my step-mom uses them. Everyone except my mom and I think maybe a part of it is just she doesn't want to accept it yet. But she's not bad about it, it's just she's not good about it if that makes sense. So that's how coming out was. [laughter]

CE: Coming from that family background, now you're starting your own family. What's most important to you in cultivating a new environment?

PB: Me and my partner are just dating, we're not-- I always talk about getting married some day because I'm a huge romantic and they're three years younger than me, so whenever I talk about it, they're like, "I'm so stressed. You can't talk about us getting

married. I'm still in college. I'm too young. Blahblahblahblah." I'm just like, "Yeah, but let's just daydream about it for a while. You know how you daydream about getting married when you're five? That's what I'm doing." And I don't know if we'd ever have kids or not.

I think if we ever did have kids-- If I ever had kids, I think I'd want to let them know that I was supportive of them and I'd try to do everything, regardless of what they told me, to keep an open mind about it. I think that was hard for me growing up. My mom-- I love her to death and I feel like I can talk to her about a lot of things, but I know that there are some things that I cannot talk to her about because she'll have a very negative reaction and she won't be supportive of them. Like right now, I'm trying to find a therapist because I'm having a lot of dysphoria around my chest, so I'm trying to see if I can get top surgery, but I know if I try to talk to my mom about that, she wouldn't be supportive. I know that I have a lot of depression, so I've been trying to see a therapist for a while now to help me combat a lot of those feelings and I know that my mom is not supportive of being depressed, which is wild. So, I can't talk to her about that, either. So, it's been a lot of-- If I ever had kids, I think I'd want to foster an environment that they felt they could come to me with anything. And also being very open about a lot of things, like I didn't know about how sex worked until my mom gave me the sex talk when I got my period. [60 MINUTES] Whereas, I think that if I ever had kids, I'd give them the sex talk, make sure that sex is something that was normalized. Throw condoms at them if they needed them. That whole thing. So trying to create an open environment, rather than one that in a weird way keeps secrets and tries to keep your emotions under lock, I guess.

CE: And to wrap up a lot of the things that you've said, I wonder if you've noticed any big changes in either butch culture or butch loving butch culture or butch loving femme culture that have changed either through your lifetime or, because you've moved to two different areas, how things are in different places?

PB: I think that in Buffalo, a lot of the lesbians that I saw-- I don't know if any of them identify as butch. A lot of them were more masculine and a lot of them had more similar presentations, which I think is something that's maybe different about lesbian culture in D.C. is that a lot of the time-- Or, not a lot of the time, but I feel like one person usually expresses their gender in one way and one person expresses their gender in a different way. If they do, like my--even between my partner and I, even though we both identify as butch, they're very much more on the masculine side. They're trying to transition to using a different name than their given name. Whereas,

I'm much more comfortable with my name. I'm okay--They're--And another thing is they're okay with just wearing a sports bra sometimes whereas I'm very much like, "I need to wear a binder at all times and I want my tits cut off!" So, there's just some differences in that sense, even if express kind of similar in those ways. So that's between the two places. I just feel-- And Buffalo's a lot more homogeneous. Which is interesting, learning about, reading about old butch culture and Buffalo being a lot of butches and femmes.

Throughout my lifetime, I guess I didn't really realize a lot of it when I was younger. Having-- I have three sets of gay aunts. Which is wild. My oldest set of gay aunts would be seen--my partner and I recently had dinner with them and it was really, really cool hearing about their experiences and how they were talking about how they went to the first March on Washington and that's where they had their first commitment ceremony, and then they were like, "Yes, we walked down the steps after our first commitment ceremony in our motorcycle leathers." [63 MINUTES] And I was like, "That's the gayest thing I've ever heard in my entire life." So, they're presentation is, I think both of them are a little bit more butch. They're very outdoorsy. They do a lot of hiking and kayaking and stuff together. But I don't know, if either of them identify as butch. But since they're older lesbians, one thing that I think is interesting is that they definitely have a community that they have. And their community is all of these older lesbians that get together to have camping events or they'll get together and get all of them a house in Cape Cod for a vacation or go on kayaking trips together. So they have a lot of outdoorsy things that they do with their community.

On the complete opposite side of the spectrum, my other gay aunts are both, not necessarily high femme, but they both have long hair and they don't really look gay on first glance. They both grew up in very Irish Catholic households. They're the first and only relationship with another woman that either of them have ever had. So, they both kind of realized that they were gay dating each other and then they got married. So that's different sides of the spectrum.

And then my aunts that're in the middle. One of them is definitely more masculine presenting than the other, but it's interesting because the one that's more femme, so to speak-- They both play rugby and that is-- She wears dresses and has longer hair, but her name is Tower because she's like six-foot tall and is a masculine-looking woman but she dresses in dresses and wore a wedding dress for their wedding, whereas her partner wore a tux for their wedding and has short hair and stuff. So, that, I think, is kind of cute. But interesting. And that's kind of-- In seeing that generational difference, my aunts that are both kind of masculine presenting are much older and my aunts who are younger tend to be more, not necessarily femme presenting, but as femme presenting as-- Yeah, I guess femme presenting is the only word to use for it. But yeah.

CE: So, we're coming to the end. Are there any questions that you wish that I had asked you, but I didn't ask?

PB: One thing that I think is really interesting and I don't know how to ask it of people, or how to figure it out is that, especially in the younger butch community, I feel like there are a lot more younger butches that identify as non-binary and they feel like that's a newer trend and that a lot of us have identified as non-binary and then as butch. Whereas, I think, a lot of older butches are like, "We are women. Exclusively women. But we're just butch women." [66 MINUTES] Which is, I think, a big difference, and I don't know, exactly, how you would ask that of people or how you would figure out when that shift happened or how it happened, but that's always something that I've wanted to know about the butch community, but I don't know how to research it or whatever. [laughter]

CE: And are there any more closing comments on either what you think of any aspect of the community or any aspect of your personal presentation or journey that you want to wrap up this interview?

PB: The butch community is something that I think saved my life and finding it and finding a butch identity was really, really important to me and has continued to be really important to me and a really important part of my identity and I'm really glad that it exists. But yeah. That's it.

CE: Thank you very much for taking the time to do this interview today.

PB: Thank you. [laughter]

End of interview