

Good afternoon, my name is Kate Brezak, and I am here in the Glickman Library, its Tuesday November 26th, 2019. I'm here with.

My name is Erika Chadbourne also here today Glickman 5th floor number nine study room.

Cool, my name is LaLa Drew. Also in Glickman study room.

Introduction [Name, date, location]

And I just wanted to remind that you can refuse to answer any of the questions that we ask, if you need us to pause at any point feel free to let us know. We are going to kind of move through this for about an hour to ninety minutes, if you need more time after that we can definitely accommodate that as well. So we will start off with having you tell us how old you are.

Age [30]

I'm thirty.

And then to start off we will start with some basic information so your pronouns and then what race and ethnicity you identify with.

Pronouns [They, them, theirs]

Cool, my pronouns are they them theirs and I identify as black.

Race [Black]

And would you provide us with some background information? So, where you born.

Lets see, I was born in Georgia, my birth certificate says its Adel, which is near Atlanta, Thomasville area.

Location of birth [Adel, Georgia]

And how long did you live there?

Only six weeks, yeah I lived there for six weeks, I was in foster home.

Would like you like to tell us more in regards to that part of your life?

Yeah, so I am adopted I yeah I was born in Georgia and I was down there for six weeks in foster home and then I came I was flown up to Boston, Logan airport and then my family came down and got me from Gray, I got wings because I was the smallest passenger on the plane. Thats that part of my life.

Adopted

Foster home [Six weeks]

Okay, so you grew up in Gray?

I grew up in Gray, so my family is white. The town I grew up in was pretty white most of the other black and brown folks that were there were also adoptees. Pretty rural, pretty like, there was like ten of us growing up at my school at its peak. So that was kind of hard.

Childhood [Gray, Maine]
Rural Location
Race

So have you noticed that like geographic location has an impact on the way that you identify with yourself? I think so, yeah I think that a lot of the ways, so I grew up in a big house it was like a big ol farmhouse in Gray and it had like a bunch of land outback. I've always felt sort of isolated, I was sort close to one of my brothers but um there's a lot of trauma and stuff in the house so I would often go out in the woods and that's the way now that I will reconnect with myself. And it sort of informs a lot of how I view the world like through connectedness and which I tie into my queerness, like I feel all of my identities kind of like, are really solidly merged together. And so I think growing up in the area having to turn inward and like figure myself out, I think definitely affected

Childhood [Gray, Maine, isolated, trauma]

Worldview [Connectedness]

the way I was able to access the things that I do now. If that makes sense.

So, how many siblings do you have?

Technically, I have three older brothers. We're they all adopted? Nope, they all are biologically related, we're all two years apart, and yeah I'm the youngest. At the time I was female identified growing up.

And did you have to go through a process to find your siblings, or was something you had access to.

Well they are all part of my adoptive family. I did find my birth mother, like I think its a little its almost a year ago now, it might be two years time does weird things to my brain. She lives in the same area that she had me in, and I talked to, actually one of the women I talked to one the phone at the adoption agency was like I held you when you were baby. And I was like oh my god, this is too much. But I was able to speak with her for a moment, and I asked her if I had any siblings and she said no, she was she had three miscarriages, and then her husband died and then she was raped and she had me. Its kind of like kind of intense.

So like getting to that point what made you reach out to your bio mom like what kind of brought you to that like with your adopted family did you talk about being adopted a lot like were you allowed to look for your mom like if I can ask those questions?

No, you can totally ask those questions, those are all good questions. I had always known that I was adopted, its fairly apparent, they are all white, and I had an open adoption so I would get like actually

Childhood
Siblings [3 older brothers]

Female identified

Adoptive family

Birth mother [Adel, Georgia]

Open adoption [Gifts from birth mother]

this ring that I got when I was younger it's really sweet. I would get packages and things and like presents and cards she wrote letters to mother but at some point my mother stopped responding and I read some of the letters that my birth mother sent and she's just like why what happened what's going on basically like you took my kid and now you are not even talking to me. Like what is going on. But there was a lot of like yeah i think because there was a lot of trauma in my home growing up and I'm sort of, I identify as having sort of a um a little bit of a chaotic and ah like a catalyst energy. For a really long time I like I was conditioned to be certain way in my family and then when I grew up I started to push back on that and my family basically like crumbled because of it. They don't get together for the holidays together anymore, and I tried to reach out and tried to be like hey can we do this or can we do this or can we do this and it was just like very resistance.

Can you give some examples?

Yeah, for sure, so I was molested when I was a kid by my oldest brother which is why I say I technically have three but not really by blood and you are not my brother so and my father yeah whatever my father was the one who was repeatedly asking me if, when I was around eight if like anyone was touching me or whatever and then I told him and then nothing happened. So years later when I trying to unpack this like I was diagnosed with depression and all these things and my mother took me to the doctor and they were just like you have a chemical imbalance my mother knowing and I didn't realize that my mother had known about the

Identity [Chaotic, catalyst energy]

Adoptive family [Conditioned, push back]

Childhood [Adoptive family, trauma]

Mental health [Depression, chemical imbalance]

abuse because no one ever talked to me about it or handled it from my memory. Basically all that is to say that from about sixteen on I really started to pay attention to my mental health and I started to try to unpack like what's actually going on like why am I like this why am I so sad you know no one looks like me like I am really just trying to find myself and I am not seeing myself or I am not getting that from my family and so all the while my mother told me when I was sixteen that I would be able to meet my birth mother and so my entire youth I was looking forward to this and then it just didn't happen because my family was just like my parents got divorced when I was seventeen and just like a lot of things happened and so there was a lot of shifting I went away to school for a second but then I came back and it was like in that time that I was really trying to be like what do I want to do where do I want to go what is going on and I got into therapy and my therapist was like you should never have to see that person who abused you ever again and I told my mother that and she was just like not at all into it, and I would ask her like for holidays for example like I wouldn't want to be in the same space as him but I would want to be able to see my family right and so I would be like can we divide the holiday right so like I could come in the mornings or he could come in the morning and then he could leave and then I could come and she was like no. And like or like really just anything, like that's a perfect example of the resistance and even when I finally confronted her I was like you know I've been holding this secret in and didn't even know that she knew that I had been abused. And so when I finally told her I was like you know he molested me and she was like well I wouldn't put it like that. and I was like,

Mental health [Sadness, finding self]

Adoptive family [Divorce]

Mental health [Therapy, validation]

Adoptive family [Holidays, resistance]

okay. Thats how deep and fucked up and just like that. And how old were you?

At that point I think I was like my trauma brain does weird things but I think I was probably like nineteen or twenty and I was at work I was on the phone with her and I was talking about going to her birthday party and I was like I really can't be in the same space as this person and she was like I wouldn't put it like that and yeah so I stopped going to family events and I really got demonized in my own family for like prioritizing my own mental health right like because I was like this structure that y'all are doing is toxic like my father was abused by his father and he was always at family events growing up like it was so deeply entrenched and like the forgiveness its not even forgiveness its just like sweeping it under the rug and like I found out later that they took my brother, the one that molested me to therapy and the therapist was like oh he was ADHD. Y'all never took me to therapy like and they were like we talked to you about it and you said you were okay and I was like I was eight and adoptee I was terrified that you would give me away. So like of course I was traumatized I am not going to say anything of course not it took months of being honest to say anything at all. And now you 're like whatever and they never took me to therapy and that therapist was a quack I told my one therapist that and he was like I want to know who that is and I was like I know me too because that was just like that is ridiculous. But um really just like refusing yeah the abuse in my early twenties is what sort of created this breaking and now I don't even really talk to, I sort of talk to one of my brothers but one of my other brothers has like a kid that I have never even met.

Mental health [Family structure]

Trauma

Abuse

So you don't have, you're not really connected to your adopted family.

Not really, like my brother Alex is really sweet and lives in Vermont with his wife and they have two dogs and they try. And just like a lot of the ways I relate to people is like really like hard. Like its really hard for me to access that kind of because I am just like all of that was so traumatic and like I love this person so much and also its just like tapping into that is so difficult for me or any like a lot of connection is really difficult for me.

Would you say that those experiences have enriched your life in anyway and changed your worldview in regards to relating to others and to society itself?

Yeah, I think its exactly because of those things like its really hard for me to like like the word regret is really hard for me because its like I have no idea who I would be or what kind of person I would be or what I would be doing if I hadn't had those experiences and its those experiences that like created how I walk through the world and how I perceive the world and so I think that like you know we need to find a different way or there are different ways to talk about trauma I just need to read up on them. that like acknowledges that harm and also is able to transmute it into other things like for example my mother used to tell me that I couldn't save everyone and I was like fucking hell I cant. which is like its true its very true and I think that knowing how I have a very specific set of experiences and in those very specific set of experiences Ive experienced a lot of pain. And knowing that there are people who are experiencing that kind of pain and also other kinds of pain allows me to like knowing what that feels

Worldview [Way of walking through the world]

like I feel like allows me to like be committed to show up how I do. Does that make sense?

And how does that come through in your daily life as an expression?

Yeah, I think just like I don't know I think just like my presence and the way that I speak and the things that I say like I teach an after school creative writing its mostly poetry focused class to a group of high schoolers and you know we talk about like the horrible products the chemicals that they put in black hair products. We talk about I talk to them about capitalism the other day, and they were like whats capitalism? And I am like this is what capitalism is. And like I talk about how it actually feels to be black and like leaning into queerness I don't lead with as much of my queerness and I do with my blackness in that school but just like talking what it feels like, and like saying its okay to be like angry or be upset in like a world that is like consistently pushing back on us I think just like how I show up and like you know have different gender presentations and like I think that it just pushes back on what people expect me to be. Like for a really long time I was like I conformed myself to how I thought I was suppose to be, and like in a lot of ways I still do, its like unlearning and conditioning and all of that. And I try really hard to like every moment like you know my hair is in afro puffs right now you like you know what I mean just like try to be like authentically myself.

And so you mentioned you didn't feel like you had that reflection of yourself in your adopted family would you say you looked to certain role models for identity purposes

Arts [Poetry]

Capitalism

Race [Black embodiment]

Gender presentations [Queerness]

and to help you see maybe parts of yourself that maybe weren't reflected in your family?

I think I definitely did, I like I think that Lauren Hill and Sister Act Two informed a very large amount of my identity she had like these rad micro braids she always wore like these plaid skirts with her combat boots and she like had her sweater tied around her waist and I was just like and she just like didn't give a fuck I mean she had like and she was like also suffering from a lot of trauma and working through a lot of stuff so it was really cool to see like someone like that. And I think I watched a lot of Whoopie Goldberg because shes like you know I think shes beautiful and a lot of people don't perceive her as being beautiful I think she gets categorized as being ugly sometimes which I am just like anyway but she was like really influential to me and like I think that yeah I had to look to music and television and movies to like figure out who I was, because like my parents sort of tried to like get me like a black babysitter but I guess my brothers were terrible and she like quit, which is fine, she doesn't need to take that crap, and also it like sucks because I am like just out here, so yeah like definitely raised me, I think just really people who are deeply in touch with like nature and spirituality and spoke truth were the ones who raised me.

Public figures [Black role models]

In regards to how you, your chosen presentation of identity did you come out to your family with that or is that something that after you kind of cut some ties to you kind of came into?

I've actually been thinking about this a lot, and I think that like growing up I remember my mother being very upset because she

wanted to put me in dresses and I was like very dissatisfied with being in dresses I wanted to like put on my brothers hand-me downs and run around outside with them and I also remember like being flash forward I think I was like maybe thirteen or fourteen and I like which is funny because I don't think I really had anything but I remember like binding my chest and then I think that it wasn't until yeah I like I had to cut ties with them that I like or was like admists of cutting ties with them that I started to mess around with it. But I remember that I like posted this picture on Facebook I thought I looked so fly I had this hat on and I had this like shirt that was like tied around my chest to like press it down and I was in like these baggy pants and my mother was like so disgusted. And Im just like we are so not, simpatica and thats fine. But yeah i think it was mostly when I sort of just cut ties that I started to really just like feel free to be myself because I think I really wanted to like you know make my mother happy in a lot of ways and I think once I let that go I was able to flourish in a different way.

So did your family kind of have a different sort of view of the LGBTQ community like how would that dynamic like would they treat it as a political process? Well like we didn't really talk about a lot of things in my family but I remember having like knowing that there was like a gay cousin uncle who like I think hes an uncle hes like my uncle's brother who lived in California and like who I met once and remember thinking that he was so cool and I know that my mom, like my family was one of the only families that like my mom was only the members of her family that likes talks to him. And so there like there was a little bit there. And then my Dad bless him but he would always tell me

Gender presentation [Chest binding]

Adoptive family [Disapproval]

that I don't care, what did he say, he was like I don't care if their black, white, red, yellow, purple, orange, or whatever as long as you love them. And I was like thanks Dad which like now I am recognizing all the different ways in which that's harmful and problematic and.

Adoptive family [Color-blindness]

Can you explain that a little bit more?

I think that it's just this thing that whiteness does where it just it like tosses in all of these absurdities to say that nothing is wrong when or it's like it uses it to mask racism even though it's coming from what I think is a very genuine sweet kind place it's still perpetuating like belief systems like I was raised to be very color blind like that like it didn't matter that I was black that were all like I remember there was this one time where I was out to eat with my brothers and my Dad my Mom was at work and the waitress was like, I wish I could remember exactly what happened, but basically it turned out that I ended up being like it's because I am black and like she was asking me about something completely different, I think she was like something like what are you doing here and I was like oh I am adopted I am black and she was like no I meant like why did you come out to eat. But it's just like I remember my family being very uncomfortable about that but I am like I recognize there is a difference like you cannot just tell me there's not a difference and like and so it's kind of mentality that like that comes from. And I think my father actually I introduced all of family to one of my partner's at the time whos yeah I forgot I did that yeah one of my partners so they've I just didn't make an announcement about it but I was just like here's this person I am dating. Because they

Racism

don't get an announcement you know they don't get to be sat down and like plus I think social media has well I am just like really loud on there so if you haven't figured it out then like your head is under a rock and which it is so.

Would you say, I want to see if I am hearing what you're saying, it's almost like saying that we are all the same is the most invalidating the differences and its kind of wiping out history. And how would you say that impacts sense of self, if it does?

Oh my god it totally does its like it totally does I like I have no I mean like I had some ideas about who I was growing up and I was trying to like morph myself into this narrow idea of like who I am which just like takes away the options it just doesn't allow a person to be all the things that they can be it treats us like stereotypes these pigeon hole things.

Identity [Stereotypes]

Would you talk a little bit about your closest friends and the people that you spend time with?

I always have a difficult time with this question because I have a difficult time I think like letting people in. And I do have a lot of really sweet and like people have moved away which is hard it like triggers my abandonment or whatever. But so I have a partner who is very sweet who I spend a lot of time with and their therapist and their white and their very sweet and we process a lot and we work through a lot and they are like really helpful and like being a mirror. I think like a lot of people I spend time with are like mirrors like I have another really good friend who whos just like seen me through a lot things like seen me through like a lot of my deep dark depressions and

Chosen family/Closest friends

has like been in spaces like that too and so like they just know she just knows what that is like. Yeah I think a lot of my friends are just really like good soul heart people like I have a friend in Philly who I used to date she is the one I introduced to my family who is just really like supportive and just really deep and who like we can always just sort of ebb and flow and come back together.

Would you say more about supportive, so what does that really look like, is there a context that see kind of like in a larger scale us manifesting that?

Yeah!

In this country.

Oh my god of course! People always talk about self care which I love self care and also what we really also need is communal care right like we need communities caring for each other and I think that a lot of people that I surround myself with really know what that looks like and what that looks like is a lot of different things its cooking for each other its checking in on each other its like listening to each other its like asking the questions its like holding one another accountable which is like really hard and also really important in large ways and in small ways its like sharing emotions hey like this like hurt when this happened and then we have to look at ourselves and then I think that it also looks like being a buddy when I have a really difficult time leaving my house sometimes and like either if its just like walking my dog because hes a pitbull and Im black and we have had a lot of really hard interactions or whether its like going to the grocery store or just like little things I think people forget how difficult it can be to

Self-care

Communal-care

like occupy a lot of identities and exist in the day to day mundane things yeah its like text messages like just thinking about you checking in on you yeah my friends have this really amazing way of letting me know that like Im loved and if I have to like cancel plans or change plans they just understand that it comes from a space of like I just really need to take care of myself its not that I don't love them or and they're really good at demonstrating what love actually looks like because growing up I didn't have I had a lot of like there was a lot of affection and a lot of like really lovely words in my home and some of the deep fundamental ways in which we are suppose to like care for each other and like take care of each other like addressing harm when it happens you know that didn't get modeled to me and so it's really lovely and a lot of my friends are a little bit older than me too so I think that that helps just I really respect elders and I really respect that sort of energy even if it is only a few years, I just like the perspective that it gives and I think that there's a patience that comes along with it too.

Addressing harm

Now you said that you have a hard time letting people in, would you say more, do you know any of the reasons why, or can say a little bit more about that?

Yeah, for sure so I absolutely ten thousand percent I mean there are a lot of other contributing factors Im sure and also its being an adoptee that really just like theres this book called the Primal Wound have you ever?

Literature

No.

It's really good I haven't myself made my way through it it's so good, its written by this woman who adopted a child and she's

psychologist and she was like I am showering this baby with like love and affection but this baby is so dissatisfied what is going on I need to like look at this and so she is someone who actually looks at it from the perspective on an adoptees and doesn't look at it from the perspective of, right, it should be a no brainer, and also its not, and anyway so when I picked up that book I was like oh my god yeah of course there's just like this you know this like initial surrender from like you're mother to self, like you're connected forever long and then whenever that cut happens like all the trust and then like to have trust broken initially and then to like be put into this family where like theres like no whatever I am just going to say it where trust was repeatedly broken and where a lot of harm happened in a lot of different ways it wasn't just the molestation that just like one aspect of the fuckery that occurred in my home. Yeah it totally like. And to have there be so much affection and to have there be so much love so its like my system its not that I wasn't denied hugs and cuddles and kisses and kind words I got that and along with that came all of this pain and harm. And so I have difficult time yeah letting people in, even though I am a very effusive person, a very emotive person, a very loving person, I like hug and I just like wah and theres a certain point where my partner who I am with we've been doing a lot of work like and I think that they are probably the closets that anyone has been in quite some time just because we are like looking at that and trying to figure out where it comes from and how it manifests but because of all of that I have a lot of ways that I can either let people think that we are closer than we are or that I just sort of retreat or throw up barriers when people get too close or like I run away being in this

Adoptees

Trust [Attachment systems]

Understanding the impact of trauma

relationship has just shown me all the different ways in other both romantic and platonic relationships like when people get through a certain point I am just like okay no I just disappear and I dance off and yeah I just have a lot of issues with trusting people.

I love that you said that.

Right, like oh my god. Its like the first like the attachment its like out attachment system are just wrecked. Like whenever that whenever that break happens.

Its that first like primal wound. Yeah.

So you talked about like at sixteen it kind of it sounds like there was an explosion in a sense like stuff boiling up for a long time so you were in high school at that time so what was high school like for you?

High school. High school was so I, I didn't, I had a lot going on as weve already established and school and I made friends with a lot of teachers and my friends that were like the like the straight A's brainy kids but I was kind of a slacker in that I just like sort of coasted by and I just like did the minimum where my friends would be like give youre fucking thing so we can like have you pass this thing and I was like okay cool. And I spent a lot of time like i did track i did drama but I spent a lot of time just kind of like existing I don't know if that makes sense like I spent a lot of time with the guidance counselors and like I spent a lot of time with my English teacher I was like a student aid and so I would just sort of like make photocopies and just sort of wander around I wasn't really very engaged because I wasn't interested and like whatever was being taught to me I did like I,

High school

my friend got me into a physics class which is really cool and interesting even though I did not have any of the prerequisites but like if you have a good relationship with teachers I was like let me into this class it was, I was like at the lowest Algebra levels and I was like let me take AP Physics and they were okay but that was an amazing class because it was like interesting it was something that I cared about but yeah I think just a lot of I just remember being like not in class a lot and being friends with teachers and wandering around and like sort of doing track but not really. I think I was like really depressed, I think I was in one of my foggy hazes at that time in my life and so its like it was a lot of like I spent a lot of time at my friends houses I didn't spend a lot of time at home like.

And do you relate that to identity and self and perhaps I am trying to like see there are connections in regards to like depression like of these things that you are speaking of and really needing that to flourish into who you are and really own that?

I think like a lot of the time like so yeah when I was like sixteen and seventeen I my parents were getting divorced and I spent a lot of time at my friends houses and I think that like its so weird because like this is being recorded but like I think that during that period of during that time I was figuring out who I am in terms of my sexuality because I don't think I was really I didn't really date in high school either. And I think I sort of I joke with my friends sometimes like I slide into boyfriend role for a lot of friends in high school and I think that looking back it easy to look back and see those relationships and be like huh and yeah its just like i think a lot of dealing with

High school

depression dealing with like those questions of like who I am attracted to and like starting to understand that there are other ways that people can be I definitely think that was going on at that point of my life. But its like difficult to tease out all of the different ways because there are so many different experiences like you know like honing in on that time because it was just like you're working you're going to school like you're driving and hanging out with all of your friends and also theres like this storm that is like home life is also in there too.

So with sexuality and kind of discovering that, if you're comfortable would you feel, would you kind of disclose a little bit more in regards to how that has helped shape you and has that empowered you, like how has that taken form?

Yeah I think like as I sort of eluded to Ive always sort of like questioned gender and presentation and sort of like I think me being an adoptee it allowed me to have sort of like a lot of different questions like or like a lot of fluidity around like my origin story and I think that having that fluidity around something so solidly linked into self allowed me later to sort of yeah question like was never really attracted to like well thats not true I dont know I just wasn't I never felt like I was attracted to CIS men in the ways that like my friends were and I think that like coming out of the wreckage that was my family and starting to like mess around with gender and like go out to sticks and like you know because that was actually a thing that still existed and to like dance and find liberation in my body and to see who I was attracting and also to see who I was attracted to and like the different ways like if I dressed one way a certain night like what

Sexuality

kind of energy would come or if I dressed in another way and I think that it helped me sort like hone into like a lot of different selves and a lot of different yeah a lot of different interests like I don't know if I can specifically tell you my identity right because I feel like theres so many parts of it and each of them show up in so many different ways and formulations that yeah I find a lot of strength from it I think that it yeah being able to like play around at some point in my life I wore stilletoes and like I had long extensions and I wore like little red dresses all the time and in other parts of my life I wore like polos and like combat boots and other points and you know its just like all those different iterations of self like now I feel like Im 30 I sort of have like a solid rotation of like or a solid like idea of who I am and how I want to show up but like all of those different selves like help to teach me to be more fluid and like less more in my body but less like self conscious of my body and like and also I really like being visibly queer with people that I am out with even if its just like holding hands because I just think that its like scary sometimes in certain places and also i think its also important to like push back.

Sexuality

Push back, can you say a little bit more about what you are pushing back against?

Yeah, oh my god, like systems. Like all of them. We need, we need news ones, or like better plans. Do you have ideas about how that, about how we should change things? Do I have ideas about how we should change things? I think that yeah I have a lot of ideas but like most of them are just really rooted in community and are rooted in like just like a back to basics I think like so I do some work in restorative justice and

Systems [Restorative justice]

transformative justice and the crux of that work is really just letting directly impacted communities say what they need right and like focusing on the fact that like communities know what they need and sometimes they may need like additional resources but they have like the knowledge and like the power to effect the change and I think that it's important to like in whichever ism we are trying to like you know changes asking who is most directly impacted what they need and also connection and also really just honoring the earth and I just think of it like basic things like but its really difficult when there's all these cogs and there's all this money and there's all this like quote on quote power which it is a power even if I don't like it that is hell bent on keeping people down and keeping like people just like yeah enslaved to this harmful harmful not at all sustainable way of living and just like leaning and putting more money into things that are just like literally murdering the planet.

Lala: We need new ones, like solid, better plans. Um, You know I have ideas about how we should change some things. I think that how we should change things, I think that, yeah I have a lot of ideas, but most of them are just really rooted in community and are rooted in like just like a back to basics, so I do some work in Yeah, and also, I really like being physically clear with people that I'm not with even, it's just like holding hands because I just think that it's like it's scary sometimes in certain places. And also, I think it's important to push back a little more.

Kate: Can you say a little more about what pushing back is?

Lala: Oh, gosh.

Kate: Do you have ideas about how we should change things?

Lala: Um, do I have ideas on how we should change things. Yeah, I have a lot of ideas. But like most of them are just really rooted in community and are rooted in like just a back to basics? I think so like I do some work in restorative justice and transparent justice. And the crux of that work is really just like letting directly impacted communities say what they need and focusing on the fact that communities know what they need and that then sometimes they may need additional resources, but they have the knowledge, the power to effect the change. And I think that it's important in whichever, if we are trying to change, change is until in whichever way, you know. Change asking who is most directly impacted what they mean. And also connection and also really honoring the earth. I just think it's just like these basic things. But it's really difficult when all these cogs and All this money and there's all this like quote unquote power, which it is a power. I don't like it. That is like hell bent on. And I'm keeping people down. I hate people this way. Yeah. Enslaved to this Harmful, harmful or not at all sustainable way of living. And just like leaning and putting more money into things that they're just like literally murdering the planet and people and their entire life. There was this we did this fire wall black thing with soul fire and someone was, god I'm trying to figure out which country, But basically in like 20 years, their entire country is just going to be underwater, there's this person sitting next to me and says my village is just going to be underwater and no one cares. Just a little bit of a tangent. But all that is to say, is that like, ask that person you know

Power of change

Sustainability

Town underwater

Kate: It says here that you do work in restorative justice, what was the path that you choose, did you end up going to college how did you kind of come into that line of work?

Education

Erika: Yeah, like career - what do you want to do? Don't want to do?

Career

Lala: I started off like, Pretending that I was going to go back, but I was really just focused on like dealing with my mental health the past 10 years. I really just felt like unpacking things and I'm trying to figure out what is going on while also trying to like I had a lot of intense bouts with depression and through that all I think my poetry was kind of like a tool that got me on the map with some things and just my writing, yeah so the path is kind of foggy, but I think through poetry, then someone asked me if I wanted to write for the Phoenix and I wrote for the Phoenix for a little while, my column was called "Un-Packing the new Normal" through that all, more basically like packing all the things, so I talked a lot about immigration and talked about racism and talked a lot about xenophobia. Like a lot of different things that people don't necessarily like to talk about. And so and then I also wrote for Black Girl in Maine talking about my experiences as being black adoptee, queer, and also discussing a lot of things like I mentioned before. And then I think that. I also work with Maine Humanities Council. I still do. I'm a facilitator, so I facilitated groups. All of. People have asked me to look beyond kennels or like speak to college students. And I just sort of put that on a resumé. And then I saw this job application to pop up and I was like, sure and they hired me and that's now shifted to it's more of a consultation like an equity consultation role. But yes, I do a lot of work with equity both internally and externally with the organization.

Focus on poetry

Writing
Phoenix

Black Girl in Maine

Job today

And I am a teaching artist. So like my poetry is like so like I said, I teach up at Lewiston High School and I'm going to be with Maine to magange me a lot more, yeah. I've had a few things published, but yes, I guess my my end goal is like. Be a writer or if I go back to school someday, I would love to be a teacher. But like a lot of money and I'm waiting for, like, school to be free.

Teacher in Lewiston

Future back to college

Erika: So do have any poetry?

Lala: What do you mean do I have?

Erika: Do you have any poetry here, with you?

Lala: I mean, I can have access to, What would you like to hear some?

Erika: I would love to hear some.

Lala: Yeah, I have. I have. I have a blog and I just started publishing things. I needed to get it out.

Erika: Yeah.

Lala: And then people started reading. It doesn't have a whole wide thing, I'll read, I got one published in the Maine Sunday Telegram, the Deepwater Column, and I'll just read this one. Kind of what we've been talking about. It's called Lilac. For a long time, I equated being good with being silent. I was told to hold contradictions in my mouth, speak up, but stay silent. Speak up when you have something to say. But don't say the truth. Don't speak your fear. Speak so you can be heard. I have a rage inside me, which has yet to find its limit. It crawls up my back, claws out my eyes and spills from my mouth. I'm at war

Writing for Maine

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Publishing poetry

Poem called, "Lilac"

Kate: Now would you say that your poetry is a form of activism?

Poetry as activism

Lala: Yeah, I can read another one that's a good example of that. This one I like

to read to youth because it's important, no, maybe not, um yeah, I would definitely say that, I think that a lot of the things that I put in my poetry is about my experiences and do You want to hear another one?

Sharing poetry
Youth

Erika: Yeah.

Lala: This one got published by Ms. Magazine, which is just like an alternative literature magazine. I wrote it. So I also do work with for the for US Fund, which is a fund that creates capacity for people of color in Maine. And we put on a writer retreat for people of color. And I wrote this one. The prompt was like, tell me about your God. And so, it's called, tell me about your God. Oh, my God looks like the stars are expanding, reaching, exploding into ordered chaos, raining havoc and beauty down from what we call space and sky. My God, is the wind barely blowing stiff, dark coils. Sun beats down upon brown blistered back. My God is black. Like onyx, like obsidian. She rages like waves on the sea. Flows as river from a stream. My God, is the soil I dig my toes in to, the seed plant and water with my bitter blood consulted tears. My God is the decay feeding the carrion, the slugs that dig the earth. She is the seed which cracks and shoot that grows, blossoms and gives everlasting life. My God is ugly. My God is infinity. My God is me. She is the curve of my lover's hip. The tremble of my lower lip. Telling me I am the one. So I like to talk about blackness and queerness and just like boldness and like fragility and just like all these things.

Ms. Magazine

Retreat for POC

Kate: And um, do you perform and share your poetry often?

Lala: Yeah so I in Lewiston see the youth and community open mic that's put on

in partnership with LA Arts 21st Century, which the 21st century afterschool program is where I teach my after school class. And so each of those shows are monthly. I will read and then I had started, which I haven't done in a little while because life, but a book, a poetry night for queer and femme people of color called blood letting. And so I would just put my poetry out there. I've been I've done several readings, like in Portland, around Portland and some in northern Maine and Yeah, so yeah I do.

Program in Lewiston, ME

Readings of poetry

Erika: So I guess, like, it sounds like you do so much like with all these different groups, so. Well, what has made you reach out so far. You seem like you deal with so many different areas, that its like -

Lala: Yeah.

Erika: So what is the biggest connection?

Connection between work

Lala: Gosh. Yeah, I do do a lot of things. It's a good thing to talk to myself about. And I think that I love experiences like I always thought of when I was younger, Which may be like a little bit of a nod to some sort of a gender thing. But I always identify as being a jack of all trades, master of none, which for a little while I was sort of hard of myself about something not just like doing one thing really well, you know, but I like experiences and I like to learn new things. Makes you really happy. And I like to make see if I can do a thing like or like. Also, if it like resonates with me, I really end up wanting to do it. Yeah, like I like acting. I was in two films this summer. Yeah, I was in damnation land, which is just like a queer film. And they were like, we need a black queer character. So in that sense, it's like there are

Experience

Gender identity

Actor in movie

only a few of us. I guess it could have been a black character as well. But I think they're really trying to have a predominantly queer cast. And then the other one, they were like. It was a role that was written for a black person. So I guess it's like I think a lot of things like that. I think people reach out to me when they're trying to like diversify or and I think a lot of times I say yes to a lot of things, but a lot of times things have to sort of be at least partially aligned with my values. But yeah, I really just like learning things. It's very interesting and fun to express yourself in a lot of different ways. It's just like, energy.

Kate: So with that, self expression, have you encountered any barriers as you've tried to develop your voice?

Barriers with self-expression

Lala: Yeah. I think that at the gate one of the biggest was, like, I've had two people to sort of like threshold in my life. Be like, who are I? My mother was like when I was first really like coming out and being loud about it. She's just like, I don't even know who you are anymore and that was like, OK. And then I had another woman elder say a similar thing. And it's like. It's like when I push back on. Like their expectations of me or like their conditioning. That's when I feel resistance and then I have to do this whole wrestling with myself. Because it's just like all these stories, not these things. And I have to be like, OK, we came to this decision we have to hold to this like we're not going to like let people tell us about it, but it's just like taking so much energy and effort. So I think for me, I had this woman tell me when she's like, you need to be liked, screw, you know? But I do. That's one of the biggest things that I'm trying to attack is like not everybody is going to like me. And like, I think that's what keeps me anyway. That's what can keep me smiling.

Mother

Coming out

Expectations

Like, if I'm, like, needing people to approve of me, then that that hinders me from showing up in the way that I feel I want to that I feel that I need to. It's something I've been wrestling with with my kids up in Lewiston. And it's like I'm in this school. It's just like, so so. And I just like I need to consistently show up like as me so that they're getting that kind of experience regardless of where we are. But it's hard. I get the other people and their opinions are the biggest barrier, which is so annoying.

Showing one's true self

Kate: And seeing you on your background sheet you talk about cultural apathy and how it's something to think about, would you think that, what would you perceive to be the main cause of this?

Cultural apathy

Kate: Hmm, let me try to think, so many things. Yeah, I think that, like. So in my poetry class, I was trying to figure out how to reach my kids, a lot of them. And I read them. I had us read this poem that is about prayer and about different generations and how they pray. And there was one stanza that was about kids who have been to America. It was set in a different country. But those kids who have been to America don't pray. And they think it's like they're too cool to pray. And it's sort of just like assimilation I think that happens. Just like needing, too. We're constantly told that we need to homogenize, even though literally impossible to homogenize. And I think that, yeah, it's like it hurts less, I think if you can - no, actually that's not true at all. It hurts in a different way. It's like you're being apathetic and like pushing things down and sort of ignoring them, really having blinders up to. Something to culture to. The things that make our souls sing like it makes it easier to. On some levels makes it easier to pretend like you can walk

Story about prayer

Assimilation

through the world, and be conditioned. But there's just like this deep. That's what's happening. It's just, you're just pushing down lava and it's going come up and explode at some point, even if it's at a person or your family member or yourself like that kind of, like ignoring that was making me physically ill. I was like when I was trying to ignore my blackness it made me sick.

Kate: And so how as society would you say the arts are kind of the best way to address this effectively?

Arts and society

Lala: I think the arts, yes. Yes. And like my conversation around it, like I felt like figuring out how to make art more accessible and figuring out how to consistently bring art to you, bring art to the streets are pretty quiet. And then having a discourse around it, I think it's like the best way.

Erika: So what kind of art do you find inspiring?

Inspiring art

Lala: I mean all art.

Erika: What art are you particularly drawn to?

Lala: I think the street art is like, that's one thing I really love about Philly is like the street art and how vibrant it is. And how beautiful it is and there are things you can do with it. I also think that music like, I really love I love music and I really love instrumental music. I think it's really important and powerful to just sort of be able to drop in to like. Yeah, like the rhythms and the life and then words. Which is weird that I'm saying it last, but I think that yeah, even. Like, even if you even if they're in a different language, you gotta understand what's wholly being

Philadelphia

Street art

said. I think this is like a rhythm and a magic to language. Yeah, I don't know, all art.

Love language

Kate: So would you say there are some relationships between cultural apathy, climate change, and capitalism and if so, how would you want to tackle that in your perception.

Cultural apathy
Climate change
Capitalism

Lala: So cultural apathy -.

Kate: Capitalism.

Lala: Capitalism.

Kate: Yeah, and climate change, the three C's.

Kate: Yeah, I mean. Capitalism is the driver definitely driving climate change and that disconnect from world of self and this continuing driving that we need to have many, we need to have things, we need to like, all these ways in which we you know this like interests like this continue driving that leg. We distance ourselves from the planet and like hold capitalism and money. Like the thing that's going to save us. Like you can buy an underground bunker, you can buy all these things. Like it doesn't matter that we are killing the Earth. And then I think tying in culture apathy. Like you just disconnect. It's like that same thing. Like just disconnecting people from like the core core. It's like the earth. If its culture, it's music. Like what? Any of these things that allow us more space for capitalism to grow. And then it's like we talk about generational trauma that's being passed down. And so like throughout, you know, especially in like in these insular places. Yeah. Capitalism is just like everything. And just like there's this poem by I can't remember her name right now, but she

Money

Disconnecting from the core

is Boston's poet laureate and I think it's called Capitalism. And she basically talks about capitalism just like a pimp. And she's just like a capitalist talking about how he runs and how runs and destroys and, how you like using everybody as puppets like. And that's exactly what happens. It's just like if you just start at the root and we all just become so malleable and so bent on this carrot on the strong. It's bullshit.

Kate: So what I'm hearing is that our culture, ways to express and community as a way to organize and create discourse and action. What would you perceive to be the next action, like how are we going to take action to change, to create more change? Do you have any positions in regards to what that would look like? Like in institutions?

Lala: I follow the NAP ministry that Sister Patricia Hersey, she founded the ministry, which is just like, not just, it's the idea that what we really like is expressed as reparations. And in that way, everybody stripped faith, specifically black and brown folks. And also we as a culture, as a society, need to rest. And I know from personal experience and also micro and macro scale, like there's also Alice Walker. There's a there's a talk with Alice Walker and Wilma Mankiller and Gloria Steinem and what problem it was. I think the book and in which Alice Walker is talking about 9/11 and she's talking about what we as a country needed to do was to take a pause. And that stuck with me. And then fast forward to hearing about the NAP ministry also saying that, like, we need to be sleeping, we need to be resting. And I think that like our next action is to rest. I think that when we slow down and when we allow our bodies to like reach equilibrium and when we create space for things to like

Steps for action
Change

NAP ministry

Mirco
Macro

Resting

flourish, like that's when all that's juicy, lovely, creative things come as like when we're all like exhaling together and maybe we've just had a big meal and really, you know, we should. And then like a revolution is born. Know I mean. But it's just like what we're so like cogs in the machine and we just keep going and going and going at any time or space for like any ideas to happen or for anyone to even feel like they have the energy to do it. And so like micro focus needs to be taking naps. Macro like company organizations need to be a like. They need to have a joy session, but they need to lay have kind of carved out for people to rest. They need to have more cushions on the floor. They need to really be encouraging and leaning into this idea that we're not machines, we are humans, we are people. And also figuring out how to like do the whole like. It's like grandiose. But just like we should not be doing this like 9-5 thing. And like I recently realized looks like not a thing, but I have to do its part of the reason why the organization that I work for We completely shifted the model to how I work because they wanted to keep me and also realizing that literally it was making me depressed and ill and sick. And so it's like folks need to have people are more productive when they have more rest, like a scientific data, we proved it. Like we have the data to prove that. What I would say is I think that our next thing that we need to focus on what we should be doing is resting. And like creating space for each other to rest. And that's like, I will walk your dog this after noon so you take a nap or I'll cover your shift. Nope not that, but something. Yeah.

Revolution born from rest

Work environment

Kate: You also mentioned responsibility. How could you say that's occurring?

Responsibility

Lala: I think that like sort of what we're talking about with climate change and with cultural apathy is that like we it's easy, especially when there's a systemic effort to be like That's over there. I don't need to deal with that because that's because that's over there. Or like that will affect the next person. I'm fine. So I don't need to. And it's like someone else will do it. It's just like this. This way of like believing that. There are so many people on the planet that someone must do the things, so I don't have to do it. It's like taking a. Yeah. It's not taking responsibility or ownership. So talk so much about ownership. But we don't talk about what it's like or what it means to like. To own our space on this earth and to own space on this earth is to like recognize that like, we are in charge of what happens here. Which means that we are tied to how we connect to people. We're in charge of how we connect to the planet. We're in charge of like undoing this like mess that's been made regardless of who made it. And I think that it can be so daunting and it can be like we've already fucked the Earth enough, so it's like there's sort of this like fear and it's like an aversion that people get instead of being like, okay, what can we do on a small scale, right? Like, what can we do with these tiny little bubbles that we look at , get bigger and spread and whatever? Just like looking at the thing, and like I can't do that. And I think it comes from fear and it comes from support from capitalism and like other systems that thrive on distracting people and telling them either that an issue doesn't exist or that it doesn't mean it's not as serious as people are making up to be and gas lighting.

Erika: I like what you say because it's so like it it like Marxism. Going back I was like, oh, wow. It's like a full circle, yeah a full

Ownership of our space

Small scale

that it's like I can see like how all the different influences have inspired you. So like how? I guess the next step is like, how do you bring that like? Because it sounds like there's so much that you like, want to experience and give so like, how did you do that? Like in your personal life? Like, how high is like black culture or queer culture with your experiences of love, like romance, like sex and pleasure.

Queer culture
Relationships

Lala: Hmm, that's a good question. It's been rough in these streets, it's been rough because things like, I've gone through periods, so when I first was coming out, I feel like I did a lot of dating. I just sort of like, ah, love, people, you know, as I sort of started to like learn about, you know, what it actually means to be black and queer. Like living in Portland, living in Maine and also live in the world, but particularly in this community. I. I've gone through periods of being like, I can only date black and brown folks. And you know that that's really hard because there aren't like a lot of black and brown folks to starting to unpack and learning yeah learning how to ask for when I need em to demand a certain level of things from people who I'm dating and intimate with, and I think that. Yeah, I don't know. I've done a lot of like naked people reading. Are you familiar? Yeah. And I like a lot of like naked performance like I remember when I was naked on a stage, I was naked on a stage like dancing to like Due Milla Witz and No Name of the song, Very Black. And then I walked out and I think that a lot of the ways in which I exist, in terms of my sexuality, in terms of my gender, in terms of like who I'm attracted to and how those people come into my life are very much tied into yeah, like this, like lovely, meshy, art-type thing, and I think that yeah in terms of intimacy and terms like sex I think that the

Black
Queerness

Intimacy

biggest, like, I listen to. Zame, a new spelling of my name, and there's this scene in the book with where Audra, she is with her lover and they are like, is it a mango and she puts it wherever, and she eats it out of her lover. I remember being just like being like, oh my God. I had no idea that you could tie in fruit and sex like, I think she talks about like the sun coming in. I think that moment like taught me, that you could like, merge a lot of different things together until a really beautiful moment. And I think that. That's kind of how I experience like myself and my sexuality is just like, playful and experience driven, and curious, which being a survivor has been, I mean I've had periods of my life, where I've had a lot of partners and I've been very open and exuberant. There were also periods of my life like I'm doing a deep dive and I'm unpacking a lot of things and I don't date and I don't sleep with anybody and I turn very inward. Now I'm sort of reconnecting with myself, I've done some unpacking. I co-facilitate a survivors group. So I started doing that in the spring and I think that doing that is sort of helping me along with this partnership is helping me to sort of reconnect and like rewire. And I find, yeah, I like different things, even just like laying in the sand on the grass.

Experience and curiosity

Kate: What would you say is the dominant factor in your experience of yourself and sexuality? And yeah, do you have any thoughts about how your sexuality intersects with social justice and undoing oppression and challenging the future.

Sexuality intersecting
Social justice

Lala: Yeah, I think that like, so being molested as a kid, and not even, and then I have a lot of really just horrible sexual encounters with cis men. And then sort of that sort of put me into this sort of

Molested

someone who is like for like sexual pleasure of cis men. And I sort of wielded that as a stereotype or this like, I sort of, or not, sort of I began to believe or experience myself as being power and reaching out, and for a while, that sort of informed a lot of like how I walked through the world. That was my stilettos and hair extensions and red lipstick phase. Or actually that part that came with like me starting to break out of that and starting to like acknowledge that I don't have to be like a victim, that I can sort of figure out how to make that work for me in some ways. And then I think that, you know, as I continue to sort of become aware, like how I have been conditioned or I am being conditioned, I've started to step into my queerness and start to have these different relationships. I learned about a different kind of power, like I learned, but like I could be like a sexual being without being like a sexual being for somebody else right. But I could like be that for myself and then I could think that I'm sexy and then I don't even need to see you. I'm just naked in my apartment. And I think that actually was a tool I started just like, really, opening into my nudity. And just like it was like a thing my friends would just like to know about me and I'm probably naked, and that was definitely a way to sort of seize that back. And yeah, I'm just by sort of and also sort of like growing out my body and like, that was like really helpful even when I was sleeping with cis man, because I was like, you know, like, shut up. And then I think that. Yeah. Just like at some point I just shunned cis man was just like, I don't need any of that. And once again it was this building of power at this building of power and awareness and knowledge around like my own autonomy. Like what I will accept and I won't accept. It has been really helpful. And I'm like communicating that to folks, which like is

Presentation of self

Strength in own sexuality

Nudity

Cis-men in relationships

really which is like really helpful, and that has put me in some scary situations.

Kate: Um, so I think we're approaching the 90 minute mark, we did have spirituality as something you checked off, do you have anything, any remaining thoughts in regards to the spiritual piece? And would you like to share?

Lala: Yeah, for sure. So I think it was like two, two years ago, I went down, I went to upstate New York and it was a POC meditation retreat and it was the first time I had ever been to a retreat before. And I experienced my body like I was like stress free, like it just like just like meditating and breathing. And I was the first time in like years and years and years that I had done that. And it sort of was like, an eye opener to me I have to always, you know, my shoulders are always up to here, always so anxious, always to stressed, like, oh, I don't have to live like that. And I met someone down there who is from Maine and we partnered up and we started POC meditation group, which we put on pause because we both need to take care of ourselves. But we alternated gatherings like weekly and biweekly and we just created a space for folks to get together and meditate together and just like talk about what it's like, you know, experiences about operating and walking throughout the world as a black or brown person. And I just think that, you know, the feedback from that, from myself and from everybody else is just like it's just like a necessary space that's crucial. And just like returning to the body and returning to the breath. I'm like, just. Yeah, like experiencing ourselves, just like witnessing our minds. And like acknowledging that, like, it's fine. Like if your mind is just like going back, it's fine come to your breath and

Spirituality

POC retreat
New York

Self-care group

Meditation in Maine POC

sort of like to bring it back just like what I was talking about going back to basics. Like that's also honestly I think how we should affect change just like yes, people should best, people need to be meditating to people needs to be like just it's it's important for connectivity and for like oneness.

Kate: Well, we just want to thank you so much for your time today and for coming in.

Erika: Thank you so much.

Lala: Perfect, thank you so much.