BARNARD COLLEGE

GENDER* IN THE ARCHIVES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Reed Cantrell

Barnard College Archives

2022
PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Reed Cantrell conducted by Autumn Johnson in 2022 in New York City. This interview is part of the Gender* in the Archives oral history project. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.
Okay. It's June 23rd. I'm in the Barnard Media Studio with Reed today. Could you please introduce yourself with your name, pronouns, and class year?

Reed (00:10):

Hi, I'm Reed. They/Them and class of 2025.

And could you tell me a little bit about the first home that you grew up in?

Reed (00:20):

About the town I grew up in?

The town or- yeah, anything about what it was like for you growing up.

Oh, wow. I grew up in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, not to dox myself, but <laugh>, but it's like, I think now the population is 10,000, so it's been growing and it's very red. Like we have gun stores and churches on like every corner, literally there's four churches on four corners. And so it's very- it's very conservative and it's also very homogeneous in the sense that it's like super white, super, like, "We've grown up here our whole lives and like, we'll continue to", so it's, it's very much that vibe.
And could you tell me a little bit about your parents or the family that you grew up with?

Reed (01:20):

In what sense?

Autumn (01:22):

Just like about them or about your family.

Reed (01:28):

<Laugh> Okay. Like, like their views on genderqueer people or just in general?

Autumn (01:32):

Just like in general as people.

Reed (01:34):

Okay. My mom is very, like, she is a socialist to her core, but also an anarchist. And she has like dabbled in communism, there's theory books, all over, all over our house. And she has posters up in the dining room of like second Bill of Rights. So her vibe is very like confrontational with the government. She's big on community. She's also a very anxious person, like about lightning and like other random things. And so, yeah, she's very much like a community builder and a big family person. My father is weird. He's just the weirdest man I've ever met. <Laugh> I don't know how else to describe him. Politically he is neutral, but also he has some randomly, very high skewed views. He just says terrible things sometimes. And so he is not always the best person. My sister leans more towards my mom politically, but she's very distant. My brother, I
don't think he's thought about politics a day in his life. And he's just very like a chill, not gonna push too hard. Just gonna lay back, smoke some weed, just roll through life kind of guy.

Autumn (02:59):

So do you feel like your family with like political wise stood out from the rest of your community at all?

Reed (03:08):

Big time. My mother, like she-we've had our tires slashed before and she's gotten like death threats. So like she, she was not-like her politics extended into like community organizing and activism. So she was for quite a few years, she was pretty like visible in the community. And so that definitely backfired on our family a bit. My father, I think he's always done his best to blend in. He's always believed in like, you know, keep your head down, just assimilate. He like re- or like listens to audio books about like how to get ahead in your career and like philosophies of life. He's definitely the self-help book guy. And so they're very, very different people. Like my dad will just agree to anything, whereas my mother will fight everyone on every little point. So I think, I think my mother definitely stands out.

Autumn (04:01):

And do you feel like you're more similar to your mom or your dad?

Reed (04:04):

Definitely. My mother <laugh> imagine if I said my dad <laugh>.
And then could you tell me what do you remember about your elementary school experience?

Reed (04:16):

Oh, I didn't like it. I really hated it. It was, I didn't have, I think I had maybe like one friend maybe the whole time. I just wasn't interested in socializing and I definitely had sort of like anxiety around talking to other people, but also contempt for them because I was already very radicalized and they would like, like our school would, would like bring up political topics, like we had mock elections or whatever. And so that definitely created tension. Yeah, if you can't tell politics has been a big part of my life. <Laugh>.

Autumn (04:58):

And were you able to find other people who shared your political opinions? Do you remember back that young?

Reed (05:05):

In elementary school? So I remember like elementary school, not really many people knew stuff, but I remember I would just talk to people like Jill Stein, the Green Party candidate, I really was like, just raging for her at the time. And so I would talk to people about her and I kind of learned like, oh, if you just state the views, but not the party, people will kind of come like, be more interested. So I would definitely like talk to my conservative neighbors and stuff like that and be like, okay, but this is what these people want, and this is what these people want. So like, so kind of, but not like solidly, like they would still be like, no, I'm a Young Republican, but like <laugh>. 

Autumn (05:58):
And what do you remember about your experiences in high school?

Reed (06:02):

About- just in general?

Autumn (06:05):

Yeah, navigating that politically or as an LGBTQ+ person

Reed (06:12):

I also didn't like it. I started out, I spent my freshman year in a public high school in the closet and like both in terms of my sexuality and my gender. And so it was, it was fine. Like, honestly it was fun cuz like, even if people suspected, like they didn't know and so they didn't care. And so that was fine, but I ended up transferring schools just for academic reasons. And then I, so I was in a private, like all girl school, which again, not, I, I let's see, no, I didn't know at that time that I wasn't a girl, but I was very uncomfortable with like the, the skirts and the dresses. It's a very traditional school. Their uniform hasn't changed in, I think a hundred years. And so yeah, since like early 1900s. And so there, in terms of like politically, there was a lot more people that I found like connection with that, like genuinely would say, "Yeah, I think like socialism is like a really good idea. Like I think I would be on board for that". And I don't know if it's just because they came from like richer families, like the demographic, there was vastly skewed. I was the poorest person or like tied with these two girls from Mississippi and like, so it was vastly skewed to like the very wealthy and so I don't, that probably had some sort of role in like making people more liberal somehow. But yeah, in terms of my sexuality, I was pretty open about being gay almost immediately. Like <laugh> wait have I told you that I hooked up with a girl at- the first
three days of being there? <Laugh> well, I did, so I wasn't hiding it at that point. Like I came out to people on the first day, just like a few people <Laugh>

Autumn (08:08):
Here and there.

Reed (08:10):
Yeah. And then I think a year later I told my closest friends that I was non-binary, but then I just kept it pretty much within that group and like a few others that I like came to trust. But other than that, I didn't really, I wasn't open about it.

Autumn (08:29):
And then back to the school uniforms you mentioned in high school, do you feel that the way you dress is like a very direct way to express your gender identity?

Reed (08:39):
Yeah, for sure. Like, ah, I don't know. We would have off uniform days, like for special occasions. Those were definitely, I was so much happier on those days. Like I would genuinely notice like how much happier I was. Um, and I think a lot, a lot of it has to do with comfort and also expression, like when we were wearing the, when we did have to wear the uniforms, which was most of the time I would wear this really big ratty, like black jacket and it wasn't in-code at all someone had just like sewn our like school logo onto it. Definitely wasn't supposed to be allowed, but no one ever like properly gave me demerits for it. So I would just wear it. And it was kind of like the best I could do to get away from that like feminine look.
Autumn (09:25):

And how do you currently define your gender identity?

Reed (09:28):

Non-Binary like, do you want descriptive words or is that like just-

Autumn (09:33):

Just like whatever you're comfortable with or whatever.

Reed (09:36):

Yeah, I would just say like, non-binary. Just uncomfortable, I think, with more feminine expression.

Autumn (09:44):

And then what were you looking for in the colleges that you were applying to?

Reed (09:48):

Hmm, I think, yeah, the first thing I was looking for was, um, like a very at, at the minimum liberal ideally leftist community, cuz I was so I was sick of being like- treading on my toes cuz I know I said before, like GBS was a very, like, it was much more liberal, but <laugh> it wasn't like you could just go around saying something still you were gonna get like weird looks, arguments, fights, stuff like that. And so I, I just wanted to be in a community where things were more accepted, like general topics, like, you know, how Critical Race Theory is starting to be banned. Well, that's something probably a lot of people at my old school would've supported, even though it's more liberal. And so I wanted to come to a place like Barnard or another school
that has a, like a highly liberal concentration. So I just wouldn't really have to worry about like watching what I said and I could focus more on like studying the things I wanted talking about them and it just being like chill.

Autumn (10:50):
And then since coming here, do you feel like you found that to be true? Like most of it is a very liberal environment?

Reed (10:57):
Yeah. I, I don't know if I've ever talked to like a properly conservative person here. Like I've definitely talked to people who are like questioning different beliefs, but I think that's very different from being like the way people were in my hometown, which is like almost violently conservative. And so I think that's definitely true of Barnard is it's extremely liberal and by all separate accounts, very leftist. Even if economically, I guess it doesn't, I haven't seen that as much it's more like socially like extremely leftist, especially in terms of professors. I think they all- at least maybe I just self-select my professors <laugh> but they've all been like pretty good about that.

Autumn (11:45):
And what drew you to Barnard when applying to college? Oh-I guess that was like <laugh> yeah.

Reed (11:50):
That's the big thing.
Autumn (11:52):

What did you intend to study when you applied?

Reed (11:56):

I actually always went in as a political science major, which I still am now. And, but I was considering like economics. No, but now I am a political science and human rights, like joint major, I'm doing the program and then doing some sort of minor probably in sociology.

Autumn (12:18):

And was economics something you tried and just didn't like, or you just changed your mind when you got here?

Reed (12:23):

I didn't even try it. <Laugh> I was just like, I was thinking about like politics. I was like, oh, I should know stuff about economics, but now I'm just like, that's not what I wanna work in. Like it's different learning things from a policy basis and then learning things on like a business basis. And I didn't wanna fuck with the business part.

Autumn (12:45):

And what stands out to you about your experience attending Barnard so far?

Reed (12:55):

I don't, I don't know. Like what do you mean? <Laugh>
I guess if you could like choose, choose a moment from your first year that stands out to you in like a personal way or a negative way.

Speaker 3 (13:14):
Mm.

Reed (13:15):
In a negative way?

Autumn (13:16):
Yeah. Yeah. Anything.

Reed (13:25):
I mean, I feel like Barnard's COVID policies are trash. Do you wanna hear about that?

Autumn (13:29):
Yeah. Yeah. No, I'd love to.

Reed (13:30):
I mean, yeah, just the way that like they don't provide enough support for people who get exposed to COVID like figuring things out. It definitely should be a more involved process than just, "Oh, you were exposed, do this" or, "Oh, you have it, do this". Like it's I feel like that's been lacking. I'm sure that'll be useful. <Laugh>.

Autumn (13:54):
And was that like personal experience? Like you got COVID and Barnard, the way Barnard handled, it just was not satisfactory.

Reed (14:03):

Yeah. Like I had, or we were exposed to COVID during midterms, but we were still in like an immunity or like a, some sort of period from the last time we had COVID, which makes me sound really irresponsible- I'm not like going to parties. But yeah, so they wouldn't let us test or like submit results. And so that was frustrating cuz we couldn't do anything official. So I basically had to like beg professors continually, like not to make me go in and this was during midterms and so I was like, it just was not fun having to bargain.

Autumn (14:45):

And how do you feel about the college experience that Barnard has provided for trans students?

Reed (14:51):

I don't feel like they provided any specific experience for us in the sense that they're actively thinking about and catering towards us in any capacity. Um, I think it's definitely more of, uh, at best we acknowledge we're- you're here kind of um, I don't, I don't feel like I've seen any effort to reach out with like services. The only extent to which I've seen them reach out in any way, and perhaps I'm just not like digging, looking for it enough, but I feel like this is true is like in little, like one-off seminars where they'll, they'll bring someone in and be like, "Look, this is a trans person. They'll talk to you now".

Autumn (15:33):
And then in terms of services that you felt were absent, what kind of services were you talking about that you feel Barnard could be providing?

Reed (15:41):

Definitely more healthcare. Like I'd love to be able to talk to someone about actually, like, options, stuff like that. Like I have no clue where to go with that. Like, and at home I had no clue where to go. The best option I had was like driving several hours to a Planned Parenthood and like, how was I gonna hide that? And I think here it's like, I don't even have the time to do that now. So yeah, just, just someone that I could talk to that wouldn't be like, "Well, fill out this insurance thing and now your parents are gonna know, cause it's gonna show up on the insurance and blah, blah, blah". So something like healthcare and then, what other services? I don't know, just something that keeps more in mind that like we're more likely to face things like harassment and stuff like that. Getting a more like comprehensive approach to that instead of treating it as like a general population issue. Like something with that, that, if that makes sense.

Autumn (16:32):

And have you had any experiences so far with Barnard's primary healthcare service or any healthcare service at Barnard?

Reed (16:40):

Yeah, I actually did go in for like a, like a test. So, but the, the specific person I was working with was really great. She was like, she covered up, there's like some sort of diagram on the wall and she covered up like "the female vagina" part so it was just like "the vagina". I was like, cool. And she, she was talking about how she just like, yeah, she was like, "Ah, well, it doesn't matter.
Anybody can have a vagina". And so she was just like fun. And so yeah, I've on, I've only had a positive experience and the extent that like I was working with a- one specifically cool person.

Autumn (17:23):

Okay. and can you tell me about some of the communities that you've been a part of during your time at Barnard?

Reed (17:29):

Yeah. I mean, you know, Arisaema that one's directly relevant. We made zines about being genderqueer at Barnard and Columbia. And then other communities like non-genderqueer ones?

Autumn (17:45):


Reed (17:48):

Wait, do you mean like clubs or like just like vague communities?

Autumn (17:52):

<Laugh> Um both. Like if you- just whatever you can think of.

Reed (17:57):

Yeah. I'm involved in like Athena Pre-Law, but also questioning whether or not I wanna be a lawyer. So it's interesting. Which in terms of this project, they're very homogeneous. In the same sense of being like mostly just white girls and then also involved in Columbia Undergraduate Law review, they're better specifically towards like disabilities and stuff like that. I think it just comes from being a much larger organization as well. They're more keeping things in mind, but I
thought that I felt like the experience there with being genderqueer was more welcoming or at least it definitely wasn't a little bit hostile. Yeah. And I think in general, just like, as Barnard as a community is much better than like any previous like solid, like large community that I've been in about being genderqueer.

Autumn (19:04):
And do you feel like the lack of diversity that you had mentioned is on behalf of the- like the organization doesn't lend itself to genderqueer members or just the lack of community kind of puts genderqueer members off from even applying to those organizations?

Reed (19:27):
For Athena Pre-Law?

Autumn (19:29):
Yeah.

Reed (19:32):
I think Athena Pre-Law is extremely like, like you have to go through an application process to be on the board. And so they're self-selecting and I think it also is geared towards women as well. Yeah. I think, I think their whole thing is like, "How do we get women into this?" and so I think as far as that organization goes, it is like they're- they're self-selecting women. And I don't remember whether or not I lied on my application <laugh> or just was like, or, or didn't lie and they just happened to pick me anyway. I don't, I don't remember if there was even like a section to like indicate pronouns or whatever it might have just been like, "Talk to us about like these issues or your plans if you were to get in here". So yeah, I think they're definitely a little bit like
just women-focused and so, "We're all women", but I don't, I don't think that's necessary at a place like Barnard where you're serving- you're claiming to serve like more than women if you're serving the Barnard population. So it feels unnecessarily restrictive.

Autumn (20:44):

And with applications like applying to Barnard and then, like you mentioned applying to Athena Pre-Law where it does ask you, or not sure on Athena Pre-Law, but for like applying to Barnard where it asks you to like, verify that you identify as a woman are checking those boxes, like- I guess, is that a difficult decision to make or is it just kind of like just another step that you have to take?

Reed (21:14):

I, okay. I definitely mulled it over. I was like, but it wasn't in the sense that like I cared about lying. I don't know. Like I didn't care whether or not I lied to Barnard.

Autumn (21:27):

And how have you felt during your time at Barnard as it still defines itself as a women's college? Like your relationship to just Barnard calling itself a women's college?

Reed (21:39):

Yeah, I don't like it. I don't know what else they would call it. Um, cuz they definitely, they definitely serve or "serve"- they definitely take the money of like a ton of non-women, people, whatever. And so I think, I think it's interesting the exclusionary aspect of that, the necessary exclusionary aspect, but I also am not advocating for being like, "Well just open it up to the cis men". Yeah. <affirmative> yeah. So I don't, I don't know it's complicated cause I'm like I do
want a space without cis men specifically. And I have no qualms about saying that <laugh> but I'm just not sure uh, like what other terms or terminology they could use to describe themselves that would be like accurate. I don't know.

Autumn (22:52):
And what is it about cis men specifically that you're looking to avoid?

Reed (22:58):
Just annoying, overbearing. I feel like I've just only had pretty negative relationships and dynamics with cis men that have like continually been around me in my life. It's just like they're barred from seeing some fundamental truth about life that makes them an asshole, which I know that's not true. Like society has specifically like geared them up to be sort of terrible by setting expectations and then cruelly, reinforcing bad behavior, like discouraging more gentle behavior I meant, but still. It's like they are existing as they are existing right now um, unfortunately, and so I just don't want to deal with the senses of entitlement, of superiority. The objectification of like my peers. Personally, I'm not worried about that like ever since I cut my hair and started wearing boys' clothes, men don't even look at me and that's great, but like it, it would be really bad or it is really bad, like on Columbia's campus. I know like terrible things happen over there. And so yeah, I just, it, as far as I can separate myself personally from men the better.

Autumn (24:22):
And so do you then find yourself kind of just avoiding Columbia and sticking to a more like Barnard-focused experience?
Reed (24:31):

Socially, yes. Academically I don't have many qualms about taking classes at Columbia, but maybe that's just because the specific classes I'm taking tend to be pretty split in the middle and also so far are very large. Like I only have one year of academic experience at Barnard and so far I haven't had to like interact with any men at all. So <laugh> so I think I've just come out a little lucky in that sense. So I haven't been avoiding it except for in like social scenarios. Like I would never join any like social clubs over there.

Autumn (25:11):

And do you feel a connection to the phrase trans joy?

Reed (25:14):

Yeah.

Autumn (25:15):

With your personal experiences in mind, how would you define trans joy?

Reed (25:22):

I think it's definitely just for me it comes out very physical. Like I like dressing a certain way, having my hair a certain way, like having- yeah. That stuff and just sometimes I'll just wake up and I'll look a little different and then I'll be like, "Yes, this is great".

Autumn (25:46):
And can you pinpoint anything like about those days where you wake up and you feel like you look different? Do you know what looks different or is it just a feeling that you get when you look at yourself?

Reed (25:59):

Yeah, I mean, just something about the, just the way I like look that morning will just look more in line with how I like or how, how my gender is, I guess, just more in line with that. So some days I'm like, oh, it's fine that my lips are this way or my jaw line is this way. And then other days it's like, no, that's not fine actually <laugh> but so I think it is different just like based on mood and also just how, how I look that day.

Autumn (26:37):

And can you think of a time when you experienced trans joy during your time as an undergraduate? This does not have to be affiliated with Barnard.

Reed (26:45):

Yeah, just in little moments like those and also just being able to like talk with other trans people normally. So it just feels good to, for like, to be able to say something and someone will just like understand it without like having to explain anything. Like some of my cis friends get confused though I, I don't try to like bring trans things up with them, but like, they'll just be like, "Huh?" or just not, not get the same things, you know.

Autumn (27:15):

And do you feel like it's been easy to find a community of other trans students when you've been at Barnard?
Reed (27:25):

Hm. I think there's definitely parts that are easier and harder. Like it's easy to meet people individually and there are now like a few groups popping up here and there where it's like connecting trans people, um, all like operated by students. So I think it's probably getting a little easier than it was before, or maybe a lot. I don't know. I wasn't here before. But for me personally, I think it's been, I think it's actually been pretty easy, but also I may just be lucky.

Autumn (28:01):

Do you feel like that experience has been impacted by the pandemic at all?

Reed (28:06):

Yeah. I mean, you definitely can't like, like, I don't know, I'm uncomfortable in like classroom sizes of space. And so it's definitely hard to like go out, meet people, go to like parties where people may be stuff like that. Like it limits your options a lot.

Autumn (28:28):

And how do you feel about Barnard's policies regarding trans students?

Reed (28:34):

Like-

Autumn (28:35):

Actually wait, backtrack, backtrack a little bit. What do you feel would make it easier to connect with other trans students?

Reed (28:48):
Huh? I don't know. Like, I feel like there still is a little bit, well, I don't know. It's just, it's almost negligible. Hmm. I don't know. That's a good question. That's something that I haven't really like thought about before. Yeah, cuz I don't wanna say like more online spaces to meet because it sucks to meet people online. But yeah, I don't know. I don't know. I think people are trying their best with things like student-run organizations and then little pocket communities like on Discord and stuff. And so I don't, I don't know what, what I would suggest. Sorry.

Autumn (29:42):

No, no, you're good. Okay. Now back to how do you feel about Barnard's policies regarding trans students?

Reed (29:51):

Like which specific policies? The only policy I know of is that like, if you figure out you're not a woman here, you can still go here. That's like the only thing I know.

Autumn (30:02):

Yeah, there's that policy there's in 2015, I'll have to double check, but I think in 2015 Barnard finally announced that it would admit trans women. So I guess different way to phrase that would be, how do you feel, I guess, how do you feel about like how long it took for Barnard to even acknowledge that trans women belong here and just that trans students exist here?

Reed (30:36):

Mm, yeah, that's interesting cuz I know they were documented and visible way before this. Got a friend in U.S. Lesbian and Gay History who was like, "Oh this is like the culture of genderqueer people, like way back when at Barnard and at like other women's schools". So I think women's
schools, I can't say this for certain, but it seems like they've always been sort of a little safe haven for like queer people. And so yeah, 2015 does seem late, but it was also when the country legalized gay marriage. So it's like, I think they're both ahead of their time and behind contextually because their community is vastly like skewed towards being queer and then therefore genderqueer in some ways. So yeah. I think they were a little late when it comes to that. And I also think Barnard is publicly concerned with their image a lot, and so, even if they did have the best intentions which I'm not trying to claim that they did, or say that I believe that they did, it takes like one board member to be like "No! We'll lose money, no one wants to send their kid to school with trans kids", so yeah, I don't know. So they rejected trans women before that?

Autumn (32:13):

Yeah, it was that because of how financial aid is filed, that would out them and then Barnard would automatically-the system would automatically deny their applications.

Reed (32:27):

Mm, interesting.

Autumn (32:31):

And how would you change Barnard's policies regarding trans students-if you would?

Reed (32:42):

Yeah, I would definitely just upfront be more opening to trans people cause that's- yeah, sorry. I'm still mulling over that like history <laugh> but yeah, they're definitely like- you're gonna have trans people here. That's just the truth of it. You might as well accept a more diverse range
of trans, genderqueer people. Yeah. So I think just being more upfront and open and sort of welcoming, cause there's, there's no really point at this stage for them to, to continue to be somewhat like distancing themselves from trans people.

Autumn (33:29):

And this is kind of along the same line. What work do you feel needs to be done to make Barnard a safe space for students to explore their gender?

Reed (33:41):

Yeah. I mean being more open upfront and being like removing the excuse from anyone of like, "This is a women's school", like taking that out of people's mouths by just being very clear that this is not just a women's school. Yeah.

Autumn (34:06):

Do you know, or I guess, do you have an idea of the kind of language they would use if they did replace or if they did phase out calling themselves a women's college?

Reed (34:20):

Yeah, so I don't, I'm not sure because I feel like any language at all is exclusionary <laugh>. I mean, they could say this would just be towards my personal preferences, but they could say we accept anyone but cis men so if you're not, if you're not like a- cuz then that would be much more representative of their actual demographic, which is pretty much anyone, but cis men, I can't think of anyone that, that doesn't cover, but I feel like they'll- I don't know if they'll ever, ever come out with that sort of terminology
Autumn (34:58):

And to wrap up what does being trans mean to you?

Reed (35:05):

Hmm, I think it just means like, there's a difference. There's a divide between what people like, like what you're both assigned at birth sex is and your gender. As well as perhaps, or at least this is probably just applicable for me only, but just how people perceive you and your gender. So just there being these strange, like societally constructed divides between like who you actually are and who society perhaps thinks you are labels you as, et cetera.