

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

AIDEN SIMON

Interviewer: Evan Zavidow

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Transcribed by Jamie Magyar

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Evan Zavidow: Hello, my name is Evan Zavidow, and I will be having a conversation with Aiden Simon for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is August 13, 2017, and this is being recorded at Aiden's home in Park Slope in Brooklyn. So, do you want to start and say names, pronoun, age?

Aiden Simon: Sure. Um, I'm Aiden. Um, I am 28, and I go by he or they.

Zavidow: Cool. Um, and to start off, do you want to tell me a little bit—or a lot—about your earliest memory that you have?

Simon: Um, I have like, two distinct early memories. One is like, way less interesting than the other. My—I think my earliest memory is when my parents took the side off of my crib and like, lowered it down to be a toddler bed, and I just remember being like, "Wow, I'm such a big girl." Um, but I think my most, like, distinct early memory is, um, the first time I went skiing. I was like, um, one-on-one with this instructor, I was probably three, and she was like, "Snow White's lost in the woods. Do you want to go find her?" and I was like, "Yeah, of course," and so like—I don't know. I just remember, like, that kind of taking the focus completely off of like, the activity at hand and like, transporting it to this other, like, larger goal. Um, and like, just getting down the mountain and being like, "Oh, I just skied," you know? Um, yeah. That's probably like, the most vivid one.

Zavidow: And where were you living during both of those memories—or where did they happen?

Simon: Um, I think for both of those, I was probably living in Connecticut. I grew up primarily in Stanford, um, but my dad has worked for IBM for almost 40 years, and so we used to move around, um, kind of in between California and Connecticut a lot.

Zavidow: Where in California?

Simon: Um, outside LA when I was really little, and then Palo Alto for a little while.

Zavidow: Okay. And when you were growing up in Connecticut, or moving around, where you with siblings, or mostly just you, or—?

Simon: Yeah. I have an older sister. She's like, two years older than I am. Just the two of us.

Zavidow: And do you still talk or see your sister or parents?

Simon: I do. Um, they're all really awesome. My sister, um, lives in Maryland, and recently had a baby, and has just been really incredible in terms of being like, "What do you want to be called?" and like, "How do—you know, how do you see yourself in relationship to my kid?" Um, and I was like, the—I don't even know what you would call it—like, the "maid of honor" at her wedding.

Um, she called me once a couple of years ago and was like, “Hey, you know, I always envisioned that you would be like, my best person at my wedding and like, you know, now that you’ve like, transitioned, I just want to know like, how you feel about that.” and like, “You know, you’re like, the person that I would want to do that,” and I was like, “I’ve literally actually never thought about who that person would be if I had a wedding.” Like, I was like, “Oh, you imagine a wedding in like, a totally different capacity than I even like, conceptualize of it, and...” Um, my parents—my dad just moved to Chicago with his partner and her child, um, and we’re pretty close. Like, he—we look a lot alike. Um, he’s really great, and so is my mom. Like, they’re both like—I don’t know. Like, I think—you know, like everyone, it—it took them time to like, adjust to like, all of these, you know, like, gender and sexuality things, um, but now they’re just like, “Oh, like, who’s your partner? Like, what’s”—like, I had times where I’ve been, um—I’ve had like, multiple partners, and they’re just like, “Okay. Oh, like, what does your partner go by, again? Like, what are their pronouns?” And, um, they’re pretty—they’re more incredible than I like, anticipated they would be, actually.

Zavidow: And has that been kind of like, a shift over time, or have they generally, from the start, growing up...?

Simon: Um, I mean, we grew up—I grew up in a pretty liberal area, and I think that helped a lot, and my dad’s family is incredibly, um, liberal. Um... I would say, like, I—I didn’t grow up with them, like, exposing me to queer culture intentionally, but, um, it was never something that they like, had issues with. Um, and I think like any kid, like, I had reservations about coming out to them, um, but that was more about, like, our interpersonal relationship than like, a larger concern about them politically.

Zavidow: Do you want to share any more about like, just childhood, what it was like moving around, or how you do feel like you gained your first exposure to queer culture, how you think of queer culture?

Simon: Hmm, yeah. Um, I really loved moving when I was a kid, I think because we’d started doing it when I was so young, and in retrospect, I think because we always had, like, corporate movers. So it was like, one day we would just like, leave our house totally a mess, and then like, we would arrive somewhere else and everything would be like, boxed up. And so there was this like, magical process to it where we didn’t actually have to like, do all the hard emotional labor of like, packing stuff. Um, but when I was twelve, we moved to Palo Alto and, um, at that point, I had been living in Connecticut for like, a long stretch of—for like, the entirety of elementary school and beginning of middle school. Um, and I was just like, “Wow, this is so cool. Like, I get to go somewhere where no one knows me at all, and I can like, decide what nickname I want to go by and like, how I want to sort of like, front myself to these people, because they have no clue who I am.” Um, and I think that was the first time that I had this kind of like, conception of like, recreating yourself. Um, and we ended up moving back about a year later, but it was really nice to just like, have that realization. Um, I’m trying to think like, what—what was my exposure to like, queer culture when I was a kid? I remember this one instance when I was—I was probably seven, and my mom and my sister and I were going to the library, and there was this guy—got out of the car and there

was this man who was wearing his watch on his right hand, and someone at school must have told me that like, that signified that you were gay, and I was like, “Leah, Leah! Like, that guy’s gay,” and she was like, “What—what are you talking about?” and I was like, “He’s wearing his watch on his right hand,” and she was like, “You’re stupid, and you shouldn’t say that.” But I remember her saying that in this way that was like—it wasn’t like, “It’s bad to be gay.” It was like, “You shouldn’t, like say things about people that are like, unkind,” or—because that was my—like, part of my intention—um, and that, you know, you shouldn’t just like, say stupid things. Um, but I’m trying to think. I don’t know. Like, I don’t—I don’t remember a moment at which I was like, exposed to like, queerness in any capacity when I was young, but I think that’s just because it was never, like—it was always like, there in some way. Um, I went to—when I was in high school, when I was a freshman, my sister, um, wanted me to join the track team with her, which I like, reluctantly did, because I’m like, not someone who like, exercises. And, um, I ended up meeting my first girlfriend. My sister quit track for some reason, and I stayed on the track team, because I was like, totally infatuated with this girl. And, um, she was a couple years older than me and, um, was like, super tough and, um, just like, beyond her years in terms of like, life experience. And, uh, there were all of these, like, girls who were out in our school who just like, kind of followed her around and like, wanted to be her girlfriend. Um, and when we started dating, I told my friends—and this would’ve been like, 2002, maybe?

Zavidow: Was this in Connecticut?

Simon: In Connecticut, yeah. Um, and I was surprised at like, how easily they all were just like, “Oh, okay, cool,” you know? Like, it was that time that like, by that point it was not such a big deal. Um, and I think like, the combo of—of having a supportive friend group and also having a girlfriend who like, no one would fuck with, um, I felt very protected and supported in my school. And it was this weird thing where like, we technically had a gay-straight alliance, but nobody felt like they needed it. Um, I mean, I would like, kiss my girlfriend in school and like, it wasn’t a problem. Um, I mean, of course, there was like, always a sort of, um, like, interest in the lesbian couple, but, uh, other than that, it was like, just a non-issue. Um, and we ended up dating on and off for—for many years, and she was actually—she ended up joining the military and, um, she was abroad when I was seriously thinking about transitioning, which was when I was like, sixteen, seventeen. Um, and I wrote her a letter, and I was like, “I don’t know how this is going to go,” because I’ve—I’ve always been pretty femme, and I was like—definitely if you like, think about that relationship, that was the dynamic. Um, and I was really lucky to like, receive a letter back from her where she was like, “I don’t care. Like, you know, you should do what makes you happy and like, I’m supportive of you no matter what you want to do.” Um, which like—I don’t—it continues to be the case. I mean, our lives have like, shifted so—so radically that she called me recently and she was like, “You know, I’ve been”—she’s now retired from the military and she was like, “All this stuff that’s going on with like, the transgender ban that’s like, being proposed is just like, preposterous, and it’s like, making me think a lot about you, and, um—it’s just like, really disheartening.” Um, yeah, but it’s just like—it’s—I think back and like, it’s such a blessing to have had like, a really strong support system, like, consistently throughout my young life.

Zavidow: And when you wrote that letter, was that something that you were already talking about with other people, or...?

Simon: Um, I think my best friend maybe knew at that point, um, but that would've been the extent of it, was like, someone who was actually there. Yeah.

Zavidow: And just to kind of further get a sense of growing up and moving around, um, in terms of like, recreating your identity, are there any nicknames or—I mean, not personas, but things you adapted that are still like, things that you remember, or that were particularly exciting for you?

Simon: Um, not really. I—I had like, a fairly gender-neutral nickname growing up, just by like, happenstance, um, and it pretty much just stuck until I changed my name. Um, yeah.

Zavidow: Are there any places in California or Connecticut that you went to a lot with your family or friends that you still think about or remember?

Simon: Hmm. Not particularly. When I was a kid, we used to go, um, with my extended family to North Carolina, to the beach, a lot. Um, you know, the sort of thing where like, you get a giant beach house and like, all the kids are sharing the same room. Um, and that's probably one of the like, fondest, like, travel memories that I have from childhood.

Zavidow: Do you remember the name of the beach?

Simon: Um, we would go in lots of different places in the Outer Banks, which is like, a string of islands off of the coast.

Zavidow: And so, after high school, graduated, you're in Connecticut. Did you stay in Connecticut, leave?

Simon: I went to art school at MICA [Maryland Institute College of Art], which is in Baltimore. Um, and that was like, actually the—the moment that I like, publicly started transitioning. Um, it was incredible. I, um, got my rooming assignment for freshman year—or, “rooming” actually is a little bit of a misnomer, because it was like, an apartment-style, um, dorm—and I had two, um, roommates who were both from Michigan. One was named Missy and one was named Katie, and it was like, “Oh, dear god—like, how is this going to actually go over?” And I can't remember if I just talked to them about it when we got there, if I like—maybe we like, talked on the phone or something beforehand—and, um, Katie's best friend was trans, and Missy's older sister's best friend was trans, and, um—so, both of them were just like, “Oh, yeah, cool. No worries.” Um, and that's kind of how—I mean, I was, you know, going to an art school, so it wasn't really an issue at all. Um, but there definitely wasn't like, a—a trans community on campus, just because it was so small. Um, and I always joke that like, if you asked someone who was like, going to school at that time, like, “Oh, yeah, that trans person,” they'd be like, “Oh, it”—they're talking about me. Um, but, yeah. It was a pretty incredible time. There was this, um, trans support group

that I started going to at this center that was like, a walking distance from campus, and I met this older trans woman who grew up, like, in Baltimore County, and, um, I ended up spending a lot of time at her house, because she was like, this, you know, older trans person who was in my life. And, um, then I started dating someone whose ex was also trans, and it was really interesting, because he wasn't like, an art school Baltimore person, and he was like, stealth and passing, and, um, it was—it was interesting to form a relationship with him, because I was like, "Oh, wow, this is something that I really don't want," because he had all of this like, um, secrecy sort of clouding his ability to like, create relationships with people that he wanted to be close with, because of this like, thing that he was really like, holding. Um, but it was—it was an interesting time. I started taking hormones when I was a freshman and, um—like, doing all of the sort of like, logistical transitioning stuff. And I was seeing this—uh, it's like back in the day of like, um, "real-life experience." I always had to like, think about what it was called. And I was seeing this doctor who worked with John Money, and literally this like, trans support group is like, about like, how to convince him to give you hormones. Um, and I would go and see him, and he'd be like, "Well, you know—like, you don't seem that like, manly. Like, most men wear like, watches and have like, different haircuts, and like"—it was just this like, whole, um, crazy idea of gender that was so, like, John Money, and so 60's. Um, I just lost my train of thought. It was something about him, but—oh, what I was going to say was that it—that, and I think the sort of moment in time, um, of like, you know, fully transitioning and like, fully integrating really, um, affected my gender expression, and I was like, very, very normatively "boy" for a long time. Um, I mean, I think I—I needed to do that, also, just to like, prove to other people that I was like, actually a boy. Um, but I think I like, transitioned at this moment where that was like, increasingly not such an issue. Um, and I'm so glad that I like, straddled that edge instead of like, having transitioned a lot earlier.

Zavidow: And did the support group have a name—like, a specific name?

Simon: Um, there were a couple of them. Um, there was one—I don't remember what it was, but it was like, a mixed-gender trans support group, and then, um, at some point, there was one that broke off that was like, mostly early-in-transition trans guys, and then there was this other support group that I don't know how I ended up becoming a part of, that was these older—like, fifty-year-old, sixty-year-old—trans guys who met for dinner at Panera Bread. And I was fortunate to have a car, and so I would drive out there, and for a long time, it was just me and this one older trans guy who, um, was a ballerina, and I think he was only coming to meet me because I think, like, no one else really needed it at the moment, and I—I really needed to have a support group that wasn't just people who were like, talking about the process of like, getting all of their things taken care of. Um, but they also did this really fun thing, which was this like, trans man, like, buffet breakfast at someone's house once a year. Um, so it was this like—just funny, like, old dudes, like, hang-out group that I somehow like, skirted into as like, an eighteen-year-old [laughter].

Zavidow: Were most of the people that you developed relationships with in these support groups older folks or like, a lot of intergenerational—intergenerational relationships?

Simon: Um, a lot of them—a lot of them were, um, older. There—I think I was probably the youngest person even in the other support—in like, the younger support group. Um, but it was a lot of—for whatever reason, it was a lot of like, older trans women and like, thirty-plus trans men.

Zavidow: And this was in Baltimore or outside of Baltimore?

Simon: Mhm. Yeah, in Baltimore, yeah. There used to be—I think it's now closed, but there used to be a gay bookstore, and then there was a gay center, and also a clinic that's similar to Callen-Lorde [Community Health Center]. Um, and it was sort of like, triangulated between those three places.

Zavidow: Do you remember the name of the bookstore or the clinic?

Simon: Um, the clinic is called—it's—it's something like, similar—it's like, a two-name entity [Chase Brexton Health Care]. I can't think of it right now. Um, I can't remember what any of them are called, actually. It might come to me.

Zavidow: Okay. And what were you studying at art school?

Simon: I was studying photography.

Zavidow: Okay. Do you still do photography?

Simon: Not as much. I, um—I ended up, um, really changing to drawing and sculpture, um, but I—I think that's largely because I went to grad school, um, in Chicago, at SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago] to do photography, and that school is really known for making you like, switch your medium. Um, but it's still in there.

Zavidow: Is art photography something that you always did growing up?

Simon: Um, yes and no. My grandmother is an artist and, um, she would always drag us around to museums and do, um—she lived really close to Temple University's art school, Tyler, which used to be out in the suburbs of Philadelphia, and, um, so she would take us a lot in the summer to their, like, art school campus, and we would do ceramics with her. Um, and she was a—a really like, um—there's no way—she had this, like, philosophy that there's like, no way to like, ruin a piece of art—that you just have to like, figure out how to fix it, um, which I think had a big, like, influence on my practice. And—but, yeah. But I never, um—I don't think it was my intention until I was probably like, fourteen or fifteen and really falling in love with cameras and photography. Uh, I—I started making a series of self-portraits when I was in high school, and it kind of happened at the right moment in terms of me like, thinking about my—my practice and my identity and like, realizing that there was this like, triangulation between like, me as the photographer, me as the like, photographed object, and me as like, the, um—the like, lived subject, and—and realizing that I could like, use my body photographically in ways that I didn't necessarily want to like, um,

present myself or like, live—live my life. Um, yeah, but when I was really little, I didn't think of myself as a creative.

Zavidow: Do you have any favorite photographers, artists, museums?

Simon: Oof, such a hard one. Um, there—I mean, so many and so few at the same time. Um, I work with this artist now whose name is Mika Rottenberg whose, uh, work is really incredible. She, uh, is—is thinking a lot about, um, globalization, and trade, and labor, and women's labor, and, um, like, grotesque bodies. It's—it's like, uh, video installations, really, and a lot of like, um, portals where like, someone's—someone's hands will be like, massaging someone's like, feet or something, and when they pull back their hands, they pull back their entire arm out of a hole in the ground in like, a farm on the other side of the world, where it's just these like, really bizarre slips between spaces. Um, and—and very, like, light-handed, really important conversations about all of these like, issues surrounding global trade. Uh, yeah. She's like, on my mind a lot these days.

Zavidow: Cool. And so, after Baltimore, did you go directly to Chicago?

Simon: I actually came back here—well, first I, um—I moved back in with my parents in Stanford for a little while, and I started doing an internship with a gallery called Michael Foley, that at the time was in Chelsea, and, um, he really took me under his wing and taught me everything that I wanted to know, and was like, super generous, but also like—you know, he would be like, “I feel really bad. Like, you should move on and get a job. Like, I can't pay you,” and I was like, “No, actually, this is really like, greatly benefiting me, um, unlike, you know, many, many other internships.” Uh, and I did that—I did that for a couple of months, and then I started interning at another gallery called [inaudible], which is now closed, and they, um, decided to bring me on as their registrar. And so I moved into an apartment in Bushwick, in the McKibbin Lofts, and, um, was living with a couple of other people who went to MICA. And I was working there for a little while, and I, um, had a really close friend, and I was like, “You know, this place is killing me. I hate thinking about like, the art market all the time when I'm making things. It's just this like, ever-present burden in my head,” and he was like, “You really should go to grad school,” and I was like, “Well, everyone in my undergrad program said they'd go. No one ever gets into grad school. You have to be like, thirty and have a developed career and like, be like, a superstar to even think about applying to grad school.” And, um, fortunately he was like, “That's just ridiculous and like, I'll help walk you through the process of applying, but you absolutely should—should go if you're like, feeling really stuck in your practice.” Um—

Zavidow: Had he gone to grad school?

Simon: Yeah. He actually went to SAIC, uh, as well, and had gone to MICA, but as a—to do like, um, a one-year master's program. And, um—you know, so he knew everyone who was there, which was fantastic for me. Um, so I—I worked at this gallery for about nine months, and then I moved to Chicago, uh, and went to grad school there.

Zavidow: And then back to New York.

Simon: Yeah, and then I came back after—um, one of my good friends is a gallery director at Simon Preston [Gallery], and she, um, knew that her neighbor, this gallery called Callicoon Fine Arts, was looking for an assistant, and she recommended me. And I was still living in Chicago at the time, but I think I was in town visiting this friend of mine, um, and sort of planning next steps for after grad school. And, um, so I went and interviewed him and like, just acted like I was back living here, because I was like, “There’s no way he’s going to like, hire me for—to like, move back here.” And, um, I—I decided to come back, like, specifically for this gallery, because they, especially at the time, represented a lot of artists who were queer and gender non-conforming and had really interesting practices. And, um, I felt like, you know, going from this very commercial gallery that was like, very sales-focused, to going to a gallery that was thinking much more holistically about their artists, um, that I would be much happier. And I moved back, and—I’m trying to think where I was living then. Oh, I ended up getting a—I started subletting a loft from, um, a musician who had a space on like, Broadway and Hewes that him and his wife and daughter had lived in for like, fifteen years. And it’s—it was this building that still hadn’t been, um—hadn’t been like, brought into loft laws, and, um, the tenants had just been like, living there forever, and the management company knew that, and the tenants just kind of felt like, “Why rock the boat? Like, why should we risk like, potentially not winning this just to like, you know, make sure that we’re—we’re safe? Like, we haven’t had any issues, and we’re just going to like, hope that that continues to be the case.” Um, and I learned how to like, run electric and like, build walls, and like, built out this loft. And, um, oddly enough, right after we moved in, the other tenants in the building were like, “Okay, we’re ready to like, get loft laws, because it might—this might be like, the last year of the last years.” And, um, we were in this funny situation, because the prime tenant of that unit just bought a brownstone, and we hadn’t been there long enough to be covered, so we just, like, negotiated a buyout for ourselves and we were like, “This has been great, um, but we can’t just, like—it’s not going to work to try and hold onto it.” Um...

Zavidow: And what year or years was this, if you remember?

Simon: That would’ve been 2014, I think? It wasn’t too—not too long ago. Um, and then I briefly moved in with my partner in Bed-Stuy, and then we bounced around for a while, and then ended up, um, subletting a place from a friend in Ridgewood, and then moving in with Yana here.

Zavidow: How—like, in what ways have you seen New York change, if at all, since you’ve been living here—or from when you were living in Bushwick before grad school?

Simon: Um, I mean, it’s been such a short period of time, but it’s changed so much, particularly, uh, the area right around the McKibbin Lofts. When I first moved there, it was like—it was 2010, and in 2008 they had had this like, massive bedbug infestation that the management company just like, didn’t want to fix, and so this was like, right around the time when bedbugs were really bad here, and the city like, finally ruled that the buildings needed to take care of it. And so still, if you Googled that building, the first thing that would come up was this New York Times article about it. And, um, I think it was still really fresh in people’s minds and, um, I knew a lot of people—

mostly older people—who were like, “Oh, you know, is your neighborhood safe? Like, don’t you have bedbugs? Like, can I walk around there with a camera? Like, I don’t know.” Um, and now it’s like, so gentrified that people were like, “Oh my god, you lived in the McKibbin Lofts? I would die to have an apartment in the McKibbin Lofts.” Um, and—and that apartment actually hasn’t—you know, the people in the apartment changed a lot, but my—my best friend, um, moved in right before I went to grad school, and he still lives there and, um, it’s nice to have some continuity, but it’s—it’s, you know, changed at such an alarming rate. Uh, yeah. I mean, it’s crazy. It’s like, things are the same, but things are different. The galleries are like, continually just like, moving around to like, find the cheapest rent and like, then everything else follows, and same with—same with all of us, you know? It’s like, we’re put on the forefront of like, gentrifying neighborhoods in different ways and, um, it’s like, such a—such a crazy just like, movement of people all the time, and it’s—it’s so, um—it’s so like, destabilizing. Yana and I went to—went on a trip to Berlin in March and, um, we were staying in this like, massive apartment there. It was beautiful. And while we were there, we learned that when you move into an apartment, your rent is fixed for the entire duration of your time in that apartment, and pretty much, a landlord can’t ask you to leave. Like, they have to continue to rent to you for as long as you want to live there. And we were like, “Wow, you know, it’s like, a whole other level of rent stabilization, basically.” If someone moves out, they can bump up the rent as much as they want to, but once someone’s living there, it’s stable. Um, and I think you really feel that like, people feel a lot more, um, grounded in this way, because I think one of the things that like, really stresses New Yorkers is thinking like, “Next year I might not be able to live here. Next year I might have to move. Next year I might not be able to afford anything. Next year, like, I don’t know—like, maybe I’ll get to stay, maybe I won’t. Maybe, like, I’m going to have to like, move out of the city. Maybe”—um, and I think we, like—we carry it with us all the time. Um, and I think it puts a lot of like, interpersonal strain on the city, too.

Zavidow: Do you feel like growing up moving around a lot at all makes you feel more comfortable with that, or...?

Simon: Um, I think it’s more that New York has made me comfortable with, like—with that level of moving around. Like, I think—I think when I was younger, it was like, a different space and different people, but my things were always ferried around to wherever we were going. Um, I mean, I think that’s the—the fortunate thing of like, having this like, corporate move and like, having a move that’s like, out of abundance rather than out of lack, and I think that, um, there are so many people who move as kids who like, can’t—can’t take all of their things with them. Um, and I think I was really lucky to like, not have to face that like, potentially traumatic, like, decision of like, going somewhere and like, not bringing certain things. Um, but I think New York has taught me to like, you know, not—not need to like, carry everything with me, um, and to think a lot more, um, like, minimally about like, what things are like, really incredibly important to me and then like, what things I can like, leave behind.

Zavidow: Do you want to share any things you have that are like, particularly precious to you?

Simon: Um, probably my most, like, precious object is a—this like, satin—pink satin blanket that my mom’s mom made for me when I was really little. Um, it’s like, literally falling apart. Um, and it—it’s actually not the original one that she made. She made one for me, um, when I was really little, because I was really attached to like, silky objects. Um, and that one I think we actually lost in a move. There were a couple that like, were lost on like, airplanes and like, on moves. Um, but that’s probably like—every now and then it’s like, lost in a box somewhere, but I know that it’s like, gonna—gonna turn up someplace or another. Um, that’s probably the big one. Um, yeah.

Zavidow: And do you like, still travel a lot, would you say?

Simon: Not as much as I’d like to. Um, Yana and my mom and I just went on a trip to—to Taos, which was really incredible, and it was like, a whole other story in itself. Um, but I think, probably like a lot of New Yorkers, we like, end up getting stuck here like, living without a car and like—you know, like, being like, “Oh, going to the Rockaways is like, a big trip,” you know? [laughter] You’re like, “Ugh, it’s gonna take all day to get down there.” Um, I’m going—we’re going down to Philly next weekend. Um, my grandmother is turning 90, um, which will be really incredible, and she’s, um, giving us some artworks that she made, and some artworks that she’s collected, which is really exciting and incredible. Um...

Zavidow: Is this the grandmother that you did ceramics with?

Simon: Mhm, yeah. Yeah. She’s still—still making things.

Zavidow: Do you have any, like, spaces—physical spaces or communities in New York that are particularly important to you that you want to share?

Simon: [long silence] That’s a funny one. Like, I was trying to think about that. I feel like over the years, I’ve become a much less social New Yorker, um, and I—I think like, I have this like, mindset of like, “I’m here—I’m here because this is like, where there’s like, work in the art world for me.” Um, I don’t know that there’s one space that like, feels particularly dear to me. I think that the only space that I have like, some sorrow about being closed, even though—not as an actual space, like, just that it was there—is, um, Excess, in Chelsea, because my best friend and I used to go there all the time, because he was teaching at FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology] and I was working at a gallery in Chelsea, and so it was like, a great, really cheap meeting spot for us.

Zavidow: Um, and so, are you doing art professionally now?

Simon: Yeah, mhm. Um, I’ve been working on this piece for many years that’s called *My Little Pony*. Um, it started with—when I was in—living in Chicago and going to grad school, um, and like, starting to think about, you know—that maybe photography wasn’t the best medium for me to be thinking in, uh, it was kind of bumping up against this issue of like, um, trans photography being seen as like, inherently biographical or autobiographical, um, and feeling like images of trans people were kind of stuck at this moment of like, self-revelation, um, even though like, photography as a medium had like, really moved past that. And, um, I was bumping heads also

with my department, uh, around this, and that like—and this issue of like, using my body in a way that I didn't see as autobiographical, but that was being read that way. Um, and I had a partner at the time whose name is Pony, and, um, they're kind of outlandish. They're—when I—when I met them, which was actually when I lived in the McKibbin Lofts, um, I was like, "I have no idea what pronouns you go by, I have no idea, like, how you identify at all, but you are the sexiest person I have ever seen in my life." And, um, Pony lives in Sydney, but happened to be in New York when we met, and, um, they ended up like, coming and traveling and visiting me over the next couple of years. And I called them, and I was like, "How do you—how do you feel about, um, doing a piece where you're a rocking horse?" And they were like, totally down for it. I mean, they're—they were once in Chicago visiting me, and there was this little kid who kept like, looking at the two of us and trying to like, figure out what was going on and, um, Pony just like, looked at them and started, like, full-on barking like a dog [laughter]. I was like, "Of co—you know, like, of course you would do that." Like, they're going to go home and be like, "Mom! Mom! Like, this person, like—I don't know, they looked like this and that, and this and that, and like, they were barking at me," and their parents are gonna be like, "What are you talking about? Like, we were standing right next to you. Like, none of this happened." Um, but they just have these like, really incredible ways of like, defusing—usually not with children, but like, defusing these situations. Um, and so there was this queer show in Chicago that my partner was organizing, and there wasn't—my partner at the time, um, is also trans, and, uh, makes work about his queer family, and, um, there wasn't a lot of like, trans inclusion in this show, which I don't think was like, an intentional oversight on this part, um, but it—it was the reality of the show. And, um, I asked that this piece that I was working on, *My Little Pony*, be in a place that was like, usually reserved for sculpture instead of performance, um, and we ended up getting into this like, big back-and-forth fight, because they were worried that this gallery that's affiliated with the institution and on the eighth floor of like, an office building downtown—that someone across the street in their office would like, see Pony, who was nude and had this, um, ponytail buttplug that matched their hair, and was on this like, wooden rocker, would be like, misinterpreted. Um, and we ended up like, coming to a resolution about it. Uh, but it was a sort of like, pivotal moment in my practice in terms of like, thinking about, um, like, the body as an object, and—and specifically like, an object that belongs to the artist, and what that like, privileged relationship is between the artist and their object, and, um, the sort of like, non-productive motion of the rocking horse like, being this thing that's like, doing this like, really futile labor. Um, and Ali, who was curating the show, asked me to, um, leave something—something in that space, since it was a sculptural object and not a performance, and so the piece ended up, um, turning into this like, hanging sideways swing. It was really like—so, a lot of like, wood and—and little like, brass trinkets and like, pink things and, um, this like, you know, raw, kind of fleshy-looking wood. Um, and then, um, I just kept thinking about this idea of like, things that move in place and, um, this like, neverending transition and like, um—like, never settling in like, a specific space, and so that swing ended up turning into this little bridge—this little, like, decorative garden bridge, um, and then it became a swingboat in a later show in New York, and then, um, recently, at a show, uh, in a gallery called LMAK, um, in the Lower East Side, that—it was a mobile. Um, and so now, it's just this kind of like—it's like, disembodied in this way, but it still has, like, the traditional like, arms of a mobile and like, um, just all of these little like, bracelets and bangles and like, chains and—and like, knick-knacks and

doo-dads that like, are like, completely nonfunctional but like, completely affected. Um, yeah. And then I also have like, a—a drawing practice, as well.

Zavidow: Is there a place where people could see your work online, or...?

Simon: Yeah, um, my website is aiden-simon.com.

Zavidow: And could you—so, you mentioned like, living in New York because it's a place for you to do art. Do you want to talk at all about the differences between doing art here, versus Chicago, versus Baltimore, or why New York in particular?

Simon: Yeah. Um, yeah. I mean, I—I think, like, it's more for me, like, New York is a place where I can get paid to like, do art-related work—um, like, separate from my practice. Um, I feel like I haven't spent so much time in Baltimore since I was like, a pretty young person, um, but I think that the advantage of living in Baltimore is the cost of living is so much lower there that you actually can like, experiment and have time to like, really develop things. Um, and Chicago I think is like, somewhere in between. The really beautiful thing about the art world in Chicago is that there's a lot of apartment galleries, um, and those spaces are like, really, really respected. Um, and, I mean, Chicago has like, so many incredible art schools that like, the conversations that are happening are really phenomenal and interesting. Um, and I think that the thing that's—Chicago is like, interesting in and of itself because it's like, large enough that there's a lot going on, but it's small enough that you run kind of in the same circles all the time. Um, and so I think there's like, the space for like, a deeper conversation to develop. Um, I mean, I think Chicago's like, such an interesting place to be trans, also. I really expected it to be, um, pretty unwelcoming, and I was surprised to find that like—I don't know like, how much time you've spent in Chicago, but, um, there's, uh, this like, gay part of town called Boystown, which is very, like, literally gay white men in like, polos and khakis. It's like, so weird. And—and like, muscle boys, too, but it's—it's very much that and, um, it's very like, masc and Midwestern and weird. And then I think because of that—because of that being like, the central hub, there's this like, split off from that, which is like, the entire rest of the queer community. Um, and when I first visited Chicago, um, when—when men were hitting on me, I would like, do what I did in New York, which was to be like, “Oh, like, I'm trans. Like, I'm not like—I'm not what you're looking for,” and they were like, “Oh, I know,” which was so different than my—like, what I was used to receiving in New York. Um, and I found that Chicago was like, really educated around, um, body politics in general, and trans things, and PoC things, and, um—like, all—just like, in such a different way, and I think, um—and there's this like, really developed community, and people sort of travel from neighborhood to neighborhood to, um—to like, go to different events that are—that are not just like, their local queer bar that they live by. Um, but I found it to be like, a much more, um, open place in terms of like, bodily expression.

Zavidow: Much more open than you'd expected, or than New York?

Simon: Than I expected, and than—than the places that I was frequenting in New York before I moved to Chicago. Um, I mean, I think that—that for me, like, the first time I lived in New York,

um—is partly because I—my very dear friend is a cis gay man and incredibly queer, but the spaces that, um—like, he I don't think feels the need all the time to like, not be in spaces that are just gay men. Um, and so that really shaped my—the spaces that I was frequenting in New York. Um, and then to move to Chicago and—and find this like, entirely different community that was, um—that was really basing itself off of not wanting to be Boystown, uh, was really awesome.

Zavidow: So would you say that like, coming back from Chicago, then you were like, better able to carve out spaces in New York that...?

Simon: I think so. I mean, I think so, but I also think that like, the—I don't know. Like, I think also there was like, a conversational shift in those few years, um, that like, went a little more mainstream like, 2013-2014—or like, I guess it was actually 2011-2013, was when I was in Chicago. I think by the time I came back, there was a lot more awareness of like, gender variance and like, queerness within the gay community that like, that had—had sort of opened up a little bit, also.

Zavidow: Would you say now—or, do you want to speak to the ways in which you feel like the gay community—queer community is or isn't welcoming of trans identities or gender variance, or why you think that shift happened?

Simon: Um, I mean, I think it was such a media push at the time that like—you know, like—I don't know. Like, I feel like, um, like, the early 2000's, there was this—this like, very big media push around like, normative trans identity and like, normative gay identity, and that sort of opened up into like, um, bigger and broader things, but I think like, that moment of it coming all the way to like, um, gender-variant queer people who are like, involved in the queer community and the gay community—like, in terms of like, mainstream media, I feel like that really took until like, 2011-2012 to like, really start to blossom, um, and open up in these ways that weren't just like, “Oh, wow, like, pregnant transgender man,” and like—you know, like, all of these just like, moments that I think, you know, all of us were really astounded by, and we were like, “We've, you know, known this for years,” but, um, I think it took some of those things to like, penetrate the gay community. Um, yeah, you know? Like, I know that like, all of the—there were so many spaces that—that existed, you know, for all these things well before that period, but I wasn't, like—for whatever reason, I wasn't like, seeking them out or accessing them. Um...

Zavidow: Do you want to say which spaces in particular, or places?

Simon: Um, like, that I was hanging out before?

Zavidow: Mhm.

Simon: Yeah. Um, I spent a lot of time at Metro in those years. Um, my best friend and I generally, I think, ended up there a lot, because they used to keep their backyard open until like, 6AM—4AM, or like, whatever time it was that they closed. Um, and I think what—what we were looking for, more than like, other people and like, social experience, was a place where we could like, sit

and talk outside all night, um, and like, drink cheap drinks, and that space like, served that function for many years. Um, yeah. That—like, that was like, where we were. Um, yeah.

Zavidow: I guess, moving on towards like, you and your interpersonal relationships, which identities would you say, of yours that you hold, are the most important to you?

Simon: Um, I guess I would say, like, I most frequently like, outwardly identify myself as like, queer and trans—um, and like, culturally Jewish. Um, I—I mean, I think, you know, that if—if we didn't have to like, put ourselves in language to other people, like, I probably wouldn't, um, but I think like, given that that's—that's like, how we understand each other, like, those are the—probably the main, um—main things that I use.

Zavidow: Knowing that, what would you say is your favorite thing about your queer trans identity, if you have one?

Simon: Hmm. Um, I mean, I like—I think I—I really like, like, being able to like, float between a lot of things. Um, I love, like, being able to—to like, have all of the things that I want, um, in terms of my like, gender expression and like—um, I'm happy that I like, feel really comfortable and really like, supported in, um, like, identifying sort of as like, a man, but also like, very much not, and like, primarily wearing women's clothes but like—you know, like, sort of being able to like, hold all of those spaces at once. Um, and like, one of the—one of the things like, in this like, um—in terms of my identity that I feel like, really blessed about now, is that I have a boss who—who really like, sees and values that. Um, she actually like—I don't know when I—when I realized this, but I realized at some point that she didn't—oh, I remember. She didn't know that I was trans. We had been working together for, I don't know, like six months, maybe a year—a year, actually—and she said to me one day—um, she asked me something about how—if my parents had—had always been—oh, actually, I remember what happened. We sent around photographs of ourselves as kids one day, like, sort of between our colleagues, for some reason. And, um, I saw her shortly after and she was like, “Oh, I saw that picture of you when you were little. It's so amazing that your parents were so supportive of you always being so femme,” and I realized that she didn't know that I was trans. And, um, I said something to her like, “Oh, you know, we really have all these other things that we need to do, and I think this is like, a larger conversation, but I'm happy to have it with you. I just don't think it's like, this—this quick, um, like, nod to this thing that you think it is.” And, um, she sort of initially thought that I was trying to like—that I was uncomfortable talking about it with my other coworkers, who actually were also queer and like, knew that I was trans and, um, we had had these conversations before. And, um, so we had this funny, um, like, Christmas gift exchange where we all gave her a gift of something that we really liked in high school, and we gave her a note, um, explaining why it was important, but none of us said who they were from. So, her job, which she loved, was trying to figure out what was from who. And she called me, and she was like, “Hey, Aiden. Um, I'm—I'm pretty positive that I've figured out which gift was from you, and it's really beautiful, and, um, I just want to know for sure if it's from you.” And I was like, “Well, we're really not supposed to tell you like, who was—like, what's from who, um, so—like, I don't think that's the rules.” And—and I was like, “Oh, I guess she figured it out.” She actually hadn't. What I had given to her was an Ani DiFranco CD,

and I said, um, like, “My first girlfriend gave this to me, and I used to live it—listen to it all the time,” because I was like, “I’m absolutely going to stump her,” and—but that was my, like, ultimate goal, was just to like, confuse her as much as possible, because no one in my workplace identified as a lesbian. And so she was calling around being like, “Is so-and-so a lesbian? Is so-and-so a lesbian? Wait, is this person a lesbian?” And she was like, having this like, whole moment of like, trying to figure out like, “What is—who is this person that I like, don’t know this thing about?” And I think someone finally like, gave her some clues and was like, “You know, like, it’s this like, other person you’re like, not thinking about here.” Um, but I think it’s also like—it’s let her know this like, other, um—like, other component, because she always saw me as like, a femme gay person, um, and now she, you know, knows my partner, who’s also trans, and, um, has like, understood the sort of complexity of my gender and, um, she frequently sees me and she’s like, “You know, my—my biggest regret is that I didn’t photograph the outfit that I wear to work every day of my life, and I really think that you should like, photograph your outfits,” um, which I think is like, such a beautiful compliment, to be like, “I see you, and I’m happy that you work here, and I’m happy that you dress the way that makes you feel comfortable.” Um, because I, you know, have not always had that, um, and it’s—it’s this way of—of saying all those things without having to, um, you know, really—really go there and like, um, speak to like, the way that she feels about my gender. It’s this like, very, um—very clear message without having to like, go into it.

Zavidow: That’s great.

Simon: Yeah.

Zavidow: Um, and I have one more question before just seeing if there’s anything else you want to share, which is that if you wanted to be remembered by one thing, or say one thing for folks to hear from you, what would it be?

Simon: Oh, gosh. Um... Hmm. I mean, I think... This is the thing that’s like, really striking to me about like, this oral history project and like, um, contributing to it, is that, um, you know, it’s always, like—it’s a project for our community, both like, present and future, and, um, I personally feel like, really blessed that like, when I was, you know, going through high school and—and in later years, I had so much access to, um, stories about other trans people and queer people and, um, I think it’s really important to like, be able to be a part of this like, project of people who’s like, sharing our experiences with each other and with like, future versions of ourselves.

Zavidow: Is there anything else that we did not talk about that you want to talk about or share?

Simon; No. I think we talked about a lot.

Zavidow: Alright, cool. Thank you so much.

Simon: Thank you.