

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

SEBASTIÁN CASTRO NICULESCU

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Transcribed by Megan Nickerson

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien, and I'll be having conversation with Sebastián Castro Niculescu for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is June 7, 2017 — 2018, and this is being recorded at the NYU Department of Sociology. Hello!

Sebastiàn Castro Niculescu: Hi!

O'Brien: How are you doing today?

Niculescu: I'm doing well. [laughter]

O'Brien: Tell me about what brought you into my office today.

Niculescu: Well, I sent you a kind of like out of nowhere email [laughter] being extremely interested in the Trans Oral History Project and we developed some email communication and I'm here as the summer intern for the summer.

O'Brien: Why did you want to be a summer intern with the New York City Trans Oral History Project? What motivated that?

Niculescu: I think it's a kind of mix of a lot of different factors, but I think most obviously is an interest in trans activism and experiences as a trans-identifying individual and wanting to really work with the archives and organizing to kind of center trans experiences, but also being someone who grew up insidep-slash-close to New York City and kind of having a base here as well.

O'Brien: What are you excited about for this summer?

Niculescu: I'm excited just to start encountering people and trying to introduce as many people as possible and really being active in community events and yeah, really like connecting with people and trying to develop meaningful relationships with them through interviewing or other means.

O'Brien: Wonderful. Tell me about where you were born.

Niculescu: So I was born in Plainview, New York, which is out in Nassau County in Long Island, and I grew up in Hicksville, New York, which is a small town in Nassau County. But yeah, grew up

there, went to school mostly there, but also had the experience of being shuffled between Queens and there very often. My grandparents still lived in Queens, so I was kind of very mobile in that, and had — what I'm coming to realize — the experience in those two physical locations growing up.

O'Brien: Where in Queens did your grandparents live?

Niculescu: My abuelita lives in Flushing; still lives in Flushing, I believe, and then my grandfather lives in Glendale-Ridgewood area. They've moved around a bit but that's primarily more the further-eastern part of Queens.

O'Brien: What do you know about your parents' life at the time you were born?

Niculescu: At the time I was born? They had been married for just a few years. They, uh... I guess I'll back track a bit, but I guess my dad is from Romania. He left a year before the revolution, grew up under communism. My mom is from Ecuador, she grew up in pretty extreme poverty and so immigrated here. They both got here in the late 80s, met each other at a nighttime English language learning class and both were in Queens — which a lot of immigrants at the time were moving to — and met in this kind of like, very mixed immigrant community that they were in. And so they met each other, they got married, and were able to move out further into Long Island and by the time I was born, had just started to rent out a house, which was a big deal for them, clearly.

O'Brien: 'Rent out a house' as in being landlords?

Niculescu: Oh, no, no, As in —

O'Brien: Renting a house —

Niculescu: As in living in a house, yeah.

O'Brien: As opposed to an apartment.

Niculescu: Yeah.

O'Brien: Okay, got it.

Niculescu: And...

O'Brien: That's a big leap.

Niculescu: [laughter] Yeah, and at the time they were pretty freshly married, and had me. I'm not sure if I was planned or not, but I'm the first child, and I have a younger sister.

O'Brien: Do you know how they paid bills when you were young?

Niculescu: Well, they have a kind of really convoluted path to where they are now financially. My mom was able to go to a few classes at Queensborough Community College under a immigrant funding program, and so she was able to take college classes and from that started working at a... I guess you could call real estate firm, but not really? It's, I don't know, these — at the time, a lot of the things they were doing were kind of interpersonal, like "Oh, I know this person who's looking for this person", and so her mom, my abuelita, found out — had a friend, who had a friend, who was hiring at this kind of like, very standard office job, and so she found that and did that for quite a long time, until very recently. She became a Spanish language translator. First for my public high school while I was there, and then now works at another public middle school on Long Island. My dad —

O'Brien: Like translating for students?

Niculescu: Yeah.

O'Brien: Like to administrators and that sort of thing?

Niculescu: Yeah. There's actually a really big influx of Latin American migrants into that area so they really need Spanish translation services, especially for parents to teachers and administrators.

O'Brien: Yeah, that makes sense.

Niculescu: Um, my dad very much went through the odd job experience, he was a UPS driver for a couple months, a taxi driver — oh and then for quite a while, was working as a car mechanic in Queens, I think primarily fixing windshields was his like specialty? But yeah, so went through that for a while, until it really — it just like that kind of lifestyle and the paycheck from being a mechanic was not so stable. So I'm not sure how he made this work, but I know it involves a little bit of white lying about a college degree [laughter], but he started learning and reading a lot about computer programming and is now working as a kind of, like, tech-guy for an office in lower Manhattan.

O'Brien: That's quite a hustle.

Niculescu: [laughter] Yeah, yeah no, it was very much the experience that they kind of had to hustle to get by until they finally got to somewhere stable.

O'Brien: What was your childhood like?

Niculescu: I would say I was lucky to have very, kind of... I wouldn't say quiet, but I had a kind of comfortable childhood. There of course were things going on, and especially later on in my childhood, that I started to have a lot of issues with, or problems that the family was facing

overall, but I think my early childhood, although I don't remember much, I don't remember there being any significant troubles or traumas. It kind of felt like it went by fairly comfortably.

O'Brien: What was your first memory?

Niculescu: [exhales] I've really thought about that, and I don't know if I really can track that down. I do remember one of my very early memories was my kindergarten classroom and its, like, setup. It had a unique setup where there were desks in the center of the room, and it was a fairly large room, especially for a public high school in the area that I was in. But it was desks in the center, there was a chalkboard to the right, but what really attracted me and what I remember was that there was a kind of long bench going along the corner up until the length of the wall, and under the bench there was stacks of books [laughter] that you could just sit at. And I do remember spending a lot of time during lunch — or whenever we had free time — in that little nook. So I guess I could say that is an early memory, but I don't know if that's my *earliest*. [laughter]

O'Brien: So what were you like as a kid?

Niculescu: I would say I was a very interesting and, like, fluctuating mix of extremely shy and very outspoken [laughter]. I remember being kind of like very queerly theatrical as a child. The kind of, like, dress up and performing all the time; doing I remember I think magic shows for my family [laughter]. But also, at the same time, like would go into states where I was very, very shy and like had trouble making friends very early on. And so it was kind of like, and I don't know exactly what the maybe partition was between those things, if there was one in the first place, but I do remember those kind of two states being in conversation with each other, I guess [laughter].

O'Brien: Can you think of a story from you growing up that illustrates either of those or both of those?

Niculescu: I think like I mentioned the performing aspect of it was really strong, but also was something that would bring out both the shyness and the kind of outspokenness. So I remember performing for a school talent show and doing what was this like, weird, I don't know — just kind of improvised dance routine very quickly just because I wanted to and because I was so excited about it, and I think this was around third grade. At the same time, immediately once it was over I wanted to go home, like I was in tears I was so scared and immediately needed to be totally by myself, or not surrounded by other children. So yeah, I guess a moment like that is when the two kind of butt heads a bit. [laughter]

O'Brien: What were your high school years like?

Niculescu: My high school years were a lot more difficult as I started to acquire vocabulary for my experiences, and what I started to identify as, but also... Yeah, so in high school I was very much a kind of straight A student, trying extremely hard to get into a very good school because I was mostly raised on relatively normative American dream, like honor the family, go to a good school kind of logic, which I'm not like... which of course I see as troubled now, but I don't know,

at the same time, still find myself attached to just because it can provide some kind of comfort for my family who have been through so much. So, I think — but that was kind of when that kind of mentality was strongest in me, and so I was really studying a lot, really based my self-worth on grades and was really not in the moment, more so just orienting myself directly towards what was coming next, or getting into a good school, and especially being good enough to get like a scholarship because that also impacted financial things about going to college. So that was a big experience, but at the same time, that was kind of like the public-facing persona I had, but at the same time in the background I remember developing an online queer community, I guess you could say. I very much had my own secret life planned out, kind of like meeting people online to have phone sex or cam sex with or very early on — perhaps too early — being on hookup apps and having a very secret shuttling between different places once I was done studying and supposedly in my room. So I do remember that, and those again were kind of like two faces that would butt heads but I kept very separate. Near the later part of high school was when I really started to, at least internally, claim my own femininity and that led to some trouble. So, I guess moving to college — which I did immediately afterwards — came at a really good time.

O'Brien: What were the online queer networks you were connected to?

Niculescu: Yeah, I was — in the early part of high school, Tumblr was really big. Now I realize that was maybe the latter part of when Tumblr was kind of a stronger queer community. It was a lot of being on Tumblr and connecting to people through there, but I think from that it was a lot more, at least for me at the time, like based on a kind of sexual connection as opposed to a community one, which was how I was navigating at the time, but also somewhat unfulfilling because I wasn't quite sure how to interact in a more social way. So it was a lot on Tumblr, Facebook as well — there was a kind of a development of the secret Facebook group... [laughter]

O'Brien: What groups were you active in?

Niculescu: There's a group called Cool Freaks' Gender Utopia that I was active in later on in high school. That one's more specifically for trans-identifying people.

O'Brien: What was that group like?

Niculescu: It was, I believe they're mostly US-based, but a lot of people just kind of griping about, "Oh I had to deal with this" or like — it was both kind of like a space for community facing... I wouldn't say therapy, but kind of like stating what was going on in people's lives and what they wanted to like — "Oh has anyone else gone through this?" — kind of reach out about, or it was very explicitly about support or crowdsourcing how people have navigated things like hormones or even getting access to hormones in the first place.

O'Brien: This is in the early and mid-2000's, or...?

Niculescu: This is in like, late 2000s, early 2010s.

O'Brien: Right.

Niculescu: Yeah, and so that group was a big part of like, I guess you could say, not like trans-politicization ... and there are also a few offshoots of the main one; a group for trans people of color and specifically for nonbinary people at the time, and so it kind of was the main cluster that organizes smaller communities that were developing at the time. Also, later, it just became a group that you could share memes on or just share what music you're into. I remember there were a lot of selfie posts like *oh I'm feeling good today, here's a selfie* and 200 people would comment with their own selfies. It was a dynamic group but I think now it's pretty settled and I don't see a lot of activity there even though I'm still technically in it.

O'Brien: What were some other Facebook groups in that orbit that you were connected to?

Niculescu: Um —

O'Brien: That spun off of it?

Niculescu: So there was a group specifically for trans people of color that was both, uh, I forget the name, but that was both kind of like complaining about the larger group and the dominating whiteness of certain trans narratives, but also more like specific concerns having to do with racism and transphobia connecting. Then I remember other offshoots being more explicitly outfit and costume based groups that I was a part of and those were really more about like *Oh, here's what I wore today and I want validation* or even critiques or just kind of like, *I want people to see what I'm wearing, I need to be seen in what I'm wearing*. But also, what should I look at if I want to buy high heels for someone who's a quote unquote men's size eleven? Those were more kind of explicitly clothing, or like accessory based, I guess you could say.

O'Brien: So you mentioned getting involved in hookups and more sexual connections with people, um, teenage sexuality and inter-generational sex are like, quite charged topics in some queer spaces and I'm wondering if you could reflect a little bit about what was good for you and what wasn't good for you, and what worked and what didn't about being involved in hooking up with near-strangers —

Niculescu: Yeah.

O'Brien: — As a teenager.

Niculescu: Yeah, that's a — I've done some reflecting on it and I don't know if I have necessarily very cohesive thoughts, but it had the kind of great experience of being able to exercise a certain sexual identity, and connected me to people in a way that maybe isn't like extremely community oriented, but I still valued as a connection. But at the same time, it did lead to some experiences of sexual assault and experiences where — and being so young, and kind of expecting certain things from a sexual connection, I just didn't know I had the ability to say no to things? So I think that was kind of — and also kind of explicitly lacking a kind of upbringing or conversation about,

like, queer sex practices. It also led me to maybe go too far in certain instances when I didn't feel super comfortable, and I think having more explicit communication at the time would have changed that, but that's something I didn't really have. So yeah, there's different aspects to it, but I think those are the two main takeaways I had or main experiences I had. Besides, it just being, in certain moments, just kind of fun to leave home at midnight and I don't know, walk to this park and... [laughter]

O'Brien: You would've had to *more* than kind of [laughter] in some cases.

Niculescu: Yeah, it was very exhilarating.

O'Brien: So more queer friendly sex ed for teens, is like the short—

Niculescu: Yes!

O'Brien: —is the takeaway message?

Niculescu: Yes, absolutely. [laughter]

O'Brien: I've listened to people sort of ruminate on their own experience, trying to reflect on whether they would advise against inter-generational relationships, or, you know, trying to make sense of that.

Niculescu: Hmm. I wouldn't advise against it. I think that was maybe one of the stronger parts of that experience because I find now that those kind of like, relationships are very much, at least in the space I'm in right now in college, confined to like, your age bracket? And I think there was something really strong and powerful about inter-generational connection, whether sexual or not.

O'Brien: Interesting. So you rushed off to college —

Niculescu: [laughter]

O'Brien: — just as things were getting dicey.

Niculescu: Yeah. Um, yeah, yeah, that — I was kind of like reaching a breaking point of being at home and having like maybe two friends at home, but really not feeling comfortable being there and really having the kind of like, strong urge to dress in certain ways and express myself visually in certain ways. So that led to some, again, underground or running away practices, like I would come into Manhattan a lot with friends and we would go to certain clubs that we could get into.

O'Brien: Where?

Niculescu: I remember the summer after my senior year of high school there was a kind of like, larger club scene in, like, Hell's Kitchen? But closer to midtown which was surprising, but there was — which I think is still active... Um, oh my gosh, what's the club called? It was like a huge cathedral — not cathedral, but old church I believe on like, 31st Street. I forget the name... if I think of it, I'll mention it. But I do know someone who was organizing parties at the time was Nicky Ottav and they were actually hiring some of my friends who I had in New York who were kind of like into the club kid lifestyle. But I remember being really attracted to it and the kind of routine of saying, "Oh yeah, I want to go to this art exhibit in New York" and telling my parents that, and then going on the train with a backpack and having like, the book I'm reading and things on top of the backpack but underneath having my crazy outfit and like, a bag of makeup and getting ready in the bathroom of the train or... [laughter] I remember there's the really bougie Standard Hotel near Astor Place, but they have bathrooms that you can just walk into and they're huge. I remember going there specifically quite a few times to get made up. Some of these clubs, beyond being in so much drag that they couldn't even tell what the age on your ID even was, or like, care — would let you in for free if you were in some kind of crazy drag because you were part of the attraction of the club. So that was something I was doing very much at the end of high school, that lead to me wanting to be more like expressly involved in clubs and certain types of drag and visual expression. But at the same time, the need to keep it hidden or lie about it or just — really just do a lot of strategy around getting there and getting seen or not getting seen, became really tiring; and also the moments where especially my parents were able to tell that something was going on were fraught moments of very tense arguments around that. So I think specifically that kind of experience of, like, going out into the city was the one thing where I was like okay I need out of the town I was living in at least, or just need to be living somewhere independently.

O'Brien: So, you wanted to get out of your parent's place, and where did you go to college?

Niculescu: I went to college — I'm in the Brown/RISD Dual Degree programs, so it's in Providence, Rhode Island and I take classes both at Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design.

O'Brien: Why did you go to Rhode Island?

Niculescu: [laughter] Um—

O'Brien: It's a long way from the New York City club scene.

Niculescu: Yeah, yeah. I wanted to go to college in New York but one, it was maybe a bit too close at the moment. I mean, my parents would just be a twenty minute train ride away, which is good in certain ways, but also at the time maybe wasn't the most exciting prospect. But also, I applied to a couple schools in New York but we just couldn't afford it. And I went to Providence not knowing that there was any kind of scene there, just went because of the program. I was doing — I mean, I was very academic in high school, but at the same time was doing a lot of art and was kind of also that kid that hung around the art classroom after school. And so I was really invested in trying to keep both alive, I guess, post-high school. So this specific program was

perfect because I could do art and also academics and it was also a way for me to continue doing art without necessarily only going to art school, which was something that my parents were explicitly not about. So yeah, so I ended up in Providence, not necessarily knowing there was a community there although I would kind of find one, but really just because it was kind of like — it just seemed like the place to go and I hadn't put much thought into it beyond just being able to leave.

O'Brien: As you were transitioning out of New York, what did you miss about the club scene in New York?

Niculescu: It's just —

O'Brien: — your life.

Niculescu: — A lot more, there's just a lot more clubs and more people. In Providence there is one, there's like a couple like, quote unquote gay bars which aren't really gay bars, they're just kind of like queer club spaces at this point. But they don't have the kind of grandeur or glamor or just kind of like, energy, that happens here.

O'Brien: How would you describe that grandeur and energy?

Niculescu: [laughter] Well, I think I was very attached to the kind of like, fake glamor that all — which is to say like, we really didn't have money or get expensive costumes or outfits, but really, it was about a kind of pastiche of things that looked good at the moment but were like super improvised, and going to thrift stores and buying like, CVS makeup and really just mixing things together to try to attempt to achieve some kind of look was kind of the most exciting part of it, I think. There was a lot of creativity in that that maybe that I see less in the Providence club scene. Which, at least in Providence, the drag is a bit more kind of like funeral impersonation drag and...

O'Brien: What would it be other than funeral perception of queer clubs in New York?

Niculescu: It was — I don't know, I was in a kind of like a community of young... not young teens, we were in our later teens but I guess young people who are like really invested in the history of club kids of the 90s. So people like James St. James or Amanda Lepore or Walt Paper were like people that we were all looking at, and because we all had access to the internet, we were like, watching old recordings of them going out to clubs. And so we were interested in that kind of history and were trying to, I guess, approach that with our own drag. So yeah, it was never about looking glamorous in a kind of like archetypical female way but rather looking weird or glamorous in whatever way we defined it. I remember I was into like, really big cat eyes and just had two gigantic triangles of black over my — like going further than my eyebrows, and like blanking out my whole face otherwise and things like that that were maybe less about even looking human [laughter]. Yeah.

O'Brien: Where — um, if like — why though? I'm trying to think about that question. Is that still a community, do you have a sense? Is that still a world?

Niculescu: I don't know. I know that the kind of people that were doing it in the 90s and then doing it at the time that I was going to the clubs here are still around, like Susanne Bartsch or Ladyfag are still throwing parties. I know for sure the people that I was going to those clubs with aren't necessarily in those communities anymore, and I also don't know what those look like now, or the extent to which they are becoming further... I don't know, they're just getting really expensive and commodified in a certain way, and that was something that was definitely starting to happen when I was going back then, that was only like five years ago or something, but...

O'Brien: I imagine the profitability of those kinds of clubs would depend on a substantial body of presumably gay people who were excited about consuming the extravagant queer glamour of these teenage kids.

Niculescu: Yeah.

O'Brien: So a certain kind of consumer market in a way.

Niculescu: Yeah, which I think is definitely booming in a certain respect now with the advent of RuPaul's Drag Race and that kind of like, mainstreaming, but also was kind of — I wasn't thinking about it too much at the time because I was so into just being able to go, but something that was happening and like really a practice that was being solidified when I was going just by letting all the drag kids in for free and then charging like, \$50 for everyone else or something like that. That was definitely a kind of like technology that was being built while I was going.

O'Brien: I've heard people talk a little bit about the effects of Madonna's Vogue on the ball scene when there suddenly was a brief opening for big figures in the ball scene to like, get recognized and appreciated in the broader club milieu then they had been in before, you know a sort of, a non-ball club world because of Madonna and yeah, very interesting.

Niculescu: Hmm.

O'Brien: So what was college like?

Niculescu: Um, well, I'm still in it technically.

O'Brien: What year are you now?

Niculescu: I'm going into my fourth year but it's a five year program, so I'm a senior but technically not.

O'Brien: How has it been?

Niculescu: It's been good, I think. It's also been its own kind of like, site of constantly re-encountering myself and shifting perceptions of self and expectations. I came into college thinking — well, I knew I was going to do sculpture at RISD which is my major now, just because art was not the thing that was supposed to get me a quote unquote career in terms of reflecting back on parental expectations and that kind of... I call it my immigrant bargaining chip; the kind of ways in which I'm able to be like "Oh look, I'm doing this thing that is supposedly getting me a career" to make my parents more comfortable but also at the same time, that's not something I'm at all interested in. In that vein, I was doing sculpture but that didn't really matter because I was never supposed to do anything with art, really. And then at Brown I came in wanting — declaring pure math and studying strong math theory and being very involved in the kind of STEM mindset. But also branching out when I could into taking Latino studies class or taking a queer theory class. Through those small classes, I really started to realize that I was a lot more interested in the kind of cultural theory of minoritarian groups, so now I'm an ethnic studies major. Well, first I became an ethnic studies concentrator, and then an applied math concentrator, so I was going to do a double concentration to in order to keep the math —

O'Brien: So a triple degree?

Niculescu: Yeah. [laughter] To keep the kind of math kernel alive, but I recently decided to just go straight with ethnic studies, especially because I just got a Mellon Mays Fellowship, so that seems possible in terms of actually going into scholarly work.

O'Brien: Congratulations!

Niculescu: Thank you! Um yeah, so, I — that's kind of like my public-facing academic journey. But at the same time I think moving to Providence and being in college was a really stressful but also a really exciting experience. I think my first year of college was pretty unique in the sense that RISD's first year is infamously difficult. You have, like, three eight-hour studios every week, and then like two other classes and like — it's a really toxic culture but there's a culture of you have to be working all the time and if you're not, then you're not devoted and like teachers oftentimes are actually really trying to make you trip up. It's... yeah. That was a particularly stressful moment for like all the people that I was with at the time, but also because of it, really made us search for solace explicitly outside of school bounds where I think other people — or at least in my experience at Brown is like — people's communities are there... their off-time is still spent at school just in like, different registers? But for us first year, we kind of had to leave school all together for a bit. So I think one of the things that was — I wouldn't say helpful, but happened because of that, was really trying to, like, reach out to queer communities in Providence and activist communities in Providence and being more involved in those as opposed to like, staying within the confines of the school. And Providence is very weird in the way it's like, so literal in terms of like, Brown University is on top a hill, and Rhode Island is next to that, still on top of the hill, and the rest of Providence is quote unquote under it, and it's a very kind of like apropos racialized class diagram. I think the experience of quote unquote getting off the hill was something that was also very helpful and made me start to experience the club scene in Providence and things like that.

O'Brien: What were a bit of what you encountered?

Niculescu: So first I was like really adamant about going to clubs in Providence. I'd go to this one specific club named Ego a lot, which was kind of like...Providence. I had a moment where I was searching the history of Providence's club scenes which was actually pretty interesting, but Ego was at the time and I think still is very much kind of like, space for the young queers slash gays to really hang out and dance and so that was something I was doing a lot of the time, like pretty much every weekend [laughter]. And I think it's also the only 18-plus one, which was a major reason why a lot of college-age people were going there. But yeah, and so through that I would go every weekend to this Club Ego and like go with my friends and dance but also there, in that time, started to develop, very slowly, my own like drag persona outside of the New York club scene or like what — because I didn't have a persona per se I was just kind of putting things on here, but in Providence at least, I started to very slowly be in a community with some other drag queens. There's definitely a group of, like, established drag queens in Providence and so I slowly was kind of being taken under their wing but never really got there because I stopped when I was — when I like, got close... but there was the experience of being in a community with queens in Providence who were performing at the time, and honing in on my own visual persona as a drag queen.

O'Brien: What has that looked like?

Niculescu: Yeah, so it's been a variety of things. My first year of college I was really interested in kind of like a mode of internet performance art, which I was doing for my classes and so based off of that I was interested in a kind of pixel-y, glittery look. So it was a lot of like — it was more — it was closer to a kind of like traditional drag aesthetic but still had its own moments. I remember — yeah, just like large flecks of colors and um, strange shapes on the face rather than looking like a face in the first place [laughter]. And yeah, yeah, and I think I really was focused on the face because clothing-wise I wasn't finding much that was super exciting and I was just kind of like, okay I'm going to wear a sports bra and a thrift store skirt. So that was kind of like the standard look, but also wasn't necessarily my focus. I was really interested in spending a lot of time on my makeup on the weekends.

O'Brien: I'm intrigued by this 'not quite looking human'.

Niculescu: [laughter]

O'Brien: Do you think there's anything to that?

Niculescu: I guess this is where, kind of like my — now that I mention ethnic studies and studying in a more scholarly fashion, my theory brain turns on and I start to think about you know things that've been written about, like animal studies and how people of color and gender nonconforming people have been drawn in relation to animality in certain ways. So I start to think about that as my immediate response, but outside of that I'm not sure. I think it... the kind of like

looks were in some way a response to the kind of mainstreaming of drag that was also happening concurrently and is still happening in a very strong way. So the idea that you had to be kind of like Instagram-ready, picture perfect queen was something that maybe entailed in this not looking human way. A reaction to that that was like *I'm going to be just as glamorous but do it in this completely different way*. So I feel like maybe that's also an aspect to it.

O'Brien: It strikes me that it pushes against the limit of what we think of as gender.

Niculescu: Yeah, that was a very big conversation at the time.

O'Brien: Do you want to say more about that?

Niculescu: I was just thinking about work I was making at the time for my studio classes and just personally. Like I mentioned I was really interested in the vein of like, internet performance art that, like, through that I was like really trying to reach a certain discussion of like abjection and really kind of like embracing things that confuse the boundaries of humanness. So that's also maybe where some of that was coming from. Like, I remember making projects where I was like putting parts of circuits and like pieces of cheap wigs and glitter into like vats of cooling gelatin and letting them solidify [laughter] and be all jiggly and then painting on them with makeup, and breaking them apart and there were these weird fatty chunks with like hair attached to them. So I was also really interested in that in terms of approaching a kind of gendered body but also was confusing it in terms of —

O'Brien: — a body without organs

Niculescu: Yeah, and it was kind of like the ephemera that like pointed to gender were imminent in the gelatin composition. I remember doing that and also things like — I don't really think this was like my best work but I remember the first performances I was excited to do was like performance where I livestreamed into my classroom from my dorm and did a quote unquote makeup tutorial but it went horribly wrong and I was spilling stuff everywhere and started like quote unquote vomiting Pepto Bismol and spreading it all over my face [laughter].

O'Brien: [laughter]

Niculescu: I was just very attracted to messes and, like, a kind of way of really embracing and claiming abjection.

O'Brien: Tell us what abjection is for people that don't know.

Niculescu: So at least the way in which I've been taught there's a literal sense of abjection which is like, you know, the things that the body casts off so like, shit, piss; the kind of materials that are so necessary to a living body but also troubled an idea of the body is like, self contained and perfect. But also abjection in a kind of conceptual way is also kind of about the lowering of stature, like putting people underneath, so like an abject position would be like — I mean it's

most often used in like, relationship to oppressed subject positions, and is something that — so there's like two kind of arms of abjection that I had seen a lot crossing over but those were the two kind of like main definitions or lineages I've been given.

O'Brien: What sort of theoretical currents have inspired you and engaged you?

Niculescu: So I'm really lucky to have an advisor at Brown who's like an amazing queer Latina who just kind of writes about abjection irreverently. Her name is Leticia Alvarado and she just published a book called *Abject Performances*. I've learned a lot of certain kinds of theoretical lineages through her and was really like, at the beginning of college when I was really entering into theory a bit more intentionally, was reading a lot of Latino studies, queer studies, and in that kind of intersection, like especially José Esteban Muñoz. So he became a very big influence for me, and Leticia was also his — I think his last dissertation student before he passed. And so she has a connection to him and through her I kind of have that taken up or like, very desirous of that lineage.

O'Brien: That's quite a remarkable figure.

Niculescu: Yeah, and I think like really important for a kind of like... for both a kind of like a self-identifying queer of color, but also like, lineage of queer color critique. And so that's been one of the most important ones. And through that going before him and seeing the kind of lineage of like, seventies, eighties women of color feminisms and people like Laverne Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga and Audrey Lord and people like that as well. I think those are the ones that I'm thinking about the most explicitly I guess, but there's a host of other ones that I've dipped my foot into, like I mentioned animal studies or now like really trying to find some kind of grounding in like, trans studies. Queer theory is always kind of there, yeah, and things like that.

O'Brien: What do you look forward to in, ah, I don't know, the remainder of your time in college, and then afterwards? Do you have aspirations of where you're headed?

Niculescu: Yeah, I think what's most exciting to me now — or at least what I'm contributing a lot of work towards is, like, being accepted into the Mellon Mays program and having to write a kind of very well-thought out thesis and so in a kind of academic way I'm kind of like excited about that and looking forward to doing this kind of long list of readings and being able to encounter artists and scholars who are working in that vein. So like my project is kind of like looking at performances that stage some kind of interracial encounter between people of color and analyzing those to think about coalitional strategies outside of ethnic nationalism or the kind of masculinist ways in which, like, racial liberation has been taken up. And so these performances are like mostly by queer women — queer and trans women of color and like I'm really interested in like the question of how people relate to each other and the problems of empathy and like what are other strategies to being in relation with each other in a really meaningful way that doesn't erase difference. So that's kind of like the essential question that I've been — that I'm like excited to write about but also do a lot of reading and conversation about, and really be

grounded in like something that I'm really passionate about, which is performance. Both as someone who does it but also as someone who is now writing about it and studying it.

O'Brien: Excellent. Are there other things that you would like to include in your interview or talk about?

Niculescu: I guess I could talk a bit more about, like, my politicization and activism.

O'Brien: That sounds great.

Niculescu: Um —

O'Brien: We haven't talked about activism at all.

Niculescu: So, in that vein I think a lot of, like, my like politics or being aware of certain politics and theories came later on in high school, especially through the internet. And I think although there's a lot of discourse around it, or you can really fault it in certain ways, the kind of Facebook political posting was like somewhere that at least started for me between certain groups of friends that I had between high school and so that was the main point of departure I guess, but I think really getting into college and studying these things while also being involved in like, certain communities in Providence has been really important. There's like a strong contingent of prison abolitionism going on in Providence that I've been really lucky to be involved with to varying degrees, and I think that's really where I received a lot of kind of my more like organizing training, as opposed to a kind of like theoretical critique of capitalism and incarceration — although the two work in tandem. So there's like Black and Pink especially in Providence. It's a very strong group that does a lot of activism around prison abolition and has like their pen-pal program but also is very involved in local prison politics, but also has certain kinds of, like, survival practices like a bail fund and outreach to legal services and especially now there's a renewed increase in — renewed attention on specifically immigration detentions, how to deal with ICE and ICE alerts and tracking wherever they are. So that's something I've been involved in, but my part in it was both doing that but also being someone who, like, has the kind of privileges of a university student. I've been trained in the sense of stealing from the university [laughter] so that means, like, getting into certain clubs that get a lot of funding from the university and then really trying to — like I remember I helped organize like a certain talk by Black and Pink from Providence in a Brown University event, but really was focused on getting them a lot of funding through that that they could put into their bail fund and things like that.

O'Brien: That's one of our main sources of funding for the New York City Trans Oral History Project and we tend to be deliberate that when we're getting honorariums we like bring along some of the militant trans women of color activists we've interviewed, we'd be like: oh you want to hear about their project and pay them lots of money!

Niculescu: Yeah! Exactly!

O'Brien: Yeah! [laughter]

Niculescu: Yeah, I think one of the veins of organizing that I've been kind of like trained in is very much the mode of like, stealing or, like, diverting funds —

O'Brien: Moving money.

Niculescu: Yeah, yeah.

O'Brien: Technically legal, technically legit.

Niculescu: [laughter] Yeah!

O'Brien: [laughter]

Niculescu: Yeah, and, like, really important in a material way I think.

O'Brien: Absolutely. There are many, many projects that are funded almost exclusively through speaker honorariums.

Niculescu: Yeah. So, I've done some of that. I was also involved in some more university-specific mental health stuff that dealt with disability in the institution. I mean RISD's, like, being on the side of a hill has no physical accessibility, but also like as I mentioned the culture is like very toxic for students with any kind of mental illness...

O'Brien: Yeah.

Niculescu: So that was also something that I was working with.

O'Brien: Yeah. Alright. Well, thank you so much!

Niculescu: Yeah!

O'Brien: I can't wait to hear when you interview other people!

Niculescu: Yeah, I'm excited!