

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ELI BODIAN

Interviewer: Sebastián Castro Niculescu

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Transcribed by Christine Buckley

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Sebastian Castro Niculescu: Hello my name is Sebastian Castro Niculescu and I will be having a conversation with Eli Bodian for the New York Trans Oral History project in collaboration with the New York City public libraries community oral history project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is June 29th, 2018 and this is being recorded at the New York Public Library offices.

Niculescu: Hi Eli.

Eli Bodian: Hi.

Niculescu: How are you doing today?

Bodian: I'm doing ok. Doing well, yes.

Niculescu: So I guess to get started, I'm just interested in what brought you to the oral history project and what your interest was in getting interviewed and potentially doing interviews yourself?

Bodian: Right. So I first heard about the project because my friend El Roy Red, who did an interview, who I work with—or I *did* work with, she doesn't work with me any more unfortunately—but she was involved in the project. She did an interview. She invited me to this panel at the Brooklyn Museum, the First Saturday of the beginning of Pride month 2018. And I went and all I really knew was that—you know, self-explanatory title, Trans Oral History Project—you know I'm like, I'm down. Great. And that she was going to be on the panel and maybe possibly performing. So I went and it was just, it was really inspiring. Like, I am definitely extremely interested in how trans people are sharing our stories and how sharing affects ourselves and each other and like, so, yeah it really resonated with me a lot.

Niculescu: That's really exciting. So to get started, where are you from?

Bodian: Well I was born in Orlando, Florida. And I have like a few earliest—like, are these my earliest memories? or am I pret—did my brain invent them? But I grew up in Long Island, New York. Yes.

Niculescu: Any specific town...?

Bodian: Yeah I grew up in Dicks Hills [laughter]. The rolling Hills of Dicks. Yes I grew up in Dicks Hills which is right on that county line of Suffolk and Nassau County if that means anything to anyone.

Niculescu: Yeah. So what was it like growing up there?

Bodian: [laughter] God what was it like growing up there? So the place where I am from...I am Jewish, ethnically Jewish, and also there's air quotes happening, air quotes Jewish. And it's a very Jewish area, it's a very Italian area. Long Island is interesting—I mean, it's like this everywhere—but there's a lot of disparity between, like, class and so my neighborhood was, like, very white but had a lot of disparity between, you know, people who were living in these giant mansions and then people who were living kind of in like very overgrown properties and like...yeah so just kind of like that scale between, like, the middle class and the lower middle class, I guess.

Niculescu: And at the time of your birth, what were your parents doing to support themselves?

Bodian: So, my dad was in—we were in Florida because my dad was at the University of Miami getting his law degree and my mom at the time—I'm the second of four—I think my mom was not working, she was a full time, full time raising us but my mum has worked for like 30 years on and off as a delivery nurse. I think at the time, yeah, she was a full-time parent.

Niculescu: And how did those, kind of like, affect your upbringing?

Bodian: My dad—that's a whole saga, I don't know if it's necessarily, like, relevant. I'll say he's in jail now. And don't feel bad about that. Feel bad that he's getting out of jail soon. You know, their occupations, I don't really know they affected me so much. My parents, my dad is from Long Island, grew up there. And my mom is from western New York which is like—it's interesting because my dad is from Long Island and from this place you expect to be more liberal and my mum grew up on a farm in western New York, very small, like, very conservative and no room for anything. And really my mum is the one who's like—I don't know what to say—who is, like, a *good* person. Because also—so I'm not the only trans child in my family. My little sister Julie is trans as well and my mom is the one...but, you know what, really at the time, growing up, it was not a supportive situation for me as like a trans, queer child. So...what was the question?

Niculescu: It was just kind of, like, about your parents occupations and how that factored into your growing up.

Bodian: Sure. Not a lot.

Niculescu: So maybe we can talk a bit more about the environment that you grew up in and having another trans sibling.

Bodian: Sure, I mean, Julie is a lot younger than the rest of us, she's the youngest. So by the time that she was really becoming a person, I was already out of the house. So it's funny, like, we have really—not like disparate, because they both kind of mirror each other now that we look back on it—but we did not have that connection or bond when we were growing up.

Niculescu: So maybe if you could talk about your personal experience in your family environment.

Bodian: Yeah, uh, lonely. In a word. Very lonely. I was a very lonely child. I guess I am kind of like the package. This is how I think of my own narrative. I—I—when you're a kid and you're not so much worried about labels or like who you are, you just do what you do. I was, you know, a trans child and like I was doing what I was doing and it was very much not accepted at all. And so I, like, you know, put it away. I mean, I didn't put it away because it was still there, but I like learned what not to express. And it—I think, I think that lead to how, like, in my own head and like lonely and, like basically like, desperately terrified and just like so disengaged from life and like from my own body for, for years—from, I would say, when I was in elementary school til college. And, that's definitely partially why like, you know, this project and things are so interesting to me 'cause like I wonder a lot, like, if I had had, like, one person, you know, who I could, like, could have connected with who was like, 'Here is maybe why you feel this way', or 'These feelings are ok'—you know, like, yeah I wonder how that would have changed my life or changed other people's lives.

Niculescu: So you mentioned really not having a person, like, growing up that could, like, show you what being trans is, but were there other spaces where you maybe started to encounter that early on, maybe in pop culture or anything...?

Bodian: I didn't really encounter, like, transness in pop culture. Really what I kind of, so, like, y'know, you start going through puberty and you're like 'Who am I? What's happening? Like, I don't connect with this, I don't connect with that, like, I don't understand why I feel so dissonant and like alone in regards to just like, identity and gender'. And so something is up. I don't know exactly what, but like there's something up here. And so like for me, kind of like the pop culture or the popular possibility was like, gay. You're gay. So I'm like ok, I must be gay because there's something going on. And also, like yes, I'm starting to feel attracted to people and like I feel attracted to women and, like, so I started connecting with people over that—like started connecting with other young people who, like, had, like, gay or bisexual identities and that was like one of the few places but I have to admit that I still never really felt like it was like...I was still deeply confused, like, through that.

Niculescu: Maybe, what were those spaces like?

Bodian: You know, they were good. So when I was in Middle School, I... Do they still have GSAs [Gay Straight Alliance]? They must have called them something else now, right? The Gay-Straight Alliance, it's like not exactly...if I'd never heard that before and someone was like 'Hey do you want to join a Gay-Straight Alliance?', I'd be like, what...?[laughter]. But, I did. And this must have been—ok, so I was born in 1990, I must have been in middle school in like eighth grade. How old are you in eighth grade? You're like 10 in fifth grade. So you must be 13. So when I was 13 it was 2003, I, with my friend Deborah, co-founded our school's GSA with, like...you know we didn't have one and we went to the school's psychiatrists at the time and we were like 'We want to start a GSA' and so they volunteered to be like the overseers of that. And that was the first—I don't want to like give it the label queer space—that's, those are, that's like the, that's my safe space, my places that I consider my trans spaces, my queer spaces—that was the first safe space that I ever had. And so that, you know, that was good. Like, I now, remembering it, I remember

it was good to connect and talk about any kind of feelings, especially like related to like gender and sexuality, which I never really got to talk about otherwise, with people. But I do remember that although well-intentioned, that the, like, school psychiatrists were not really the best. Like I had the feeling they were like trying to perform like therapy on us while we were just trying to have, like, a safe space to, like, be queer. Like, which is like, problematic, probably [laughter]. So there was that. But really other than that, it was like meeting people, whatever, through various like other schools, or like you'd meet someone and you would kind of like—you know, it's like now except we're more communicative—you'd just kind of get the feeling or just test each other out to, like, see, like, maybe this person is like open to this or, like, experiences this and then...that was how I met people. But I didn't have any kind of, like, stable support network. Like, these were just people I would see, like, when I would see them.

Niculescu: I think the GSA's interesting because it's very much a, kind of like, specific historic thing.

Bodian: It's such early-2000s. It, it really is. [laughter] That was what my, like, early-2000s, like, queer teenager moment. But it's interesting because I was talking to someone at the—last night, there was like a interviewer training for this project and I was talking to someone who is five years younger than me who was telling me about how now—and I'm familiar with this—like, now a lot of those age of trans people have YouTubers, like trans YouTubers who are, like—it was just interesting to me to be, like, 'Oh yeah, like, I didn't have that at that age.' I had *this* and we each had a step that's like a different thing. I mean, obviously there's more out there than just like trans YouTubers, but like that's perhaps the kind of thing that I would have been able to see, like, when I was a teenager if that had existed. And instead I went to the library.

Niculescu: And what would you do at the library?

Bodian: I would spend hours every single day, after school I'd go to the library and just pour through everything looking for any kind of gay or queer or trans literature that I could get my hands on. That was my hobby.

Niculescu: And did you find anything?

Bodian: Yes. Well, yes, I did find a lot of hopeful things. I didn't—again, most of the things that I found were, like, stories about cis people, but also stories about the, like, LGBTQIA+ community at large. I remember...what were my finds? The Well of Loneliness - that was one of my first. I found that and I was like, 'These exist, oh my god, they're at the library!'. That was when I was like, 'Ok now I have to find everything I can'. So I found this collection of stories called 'Am I Blue?'. I want to ask you if you've heard of that, even though you've never. It's like this collection of short stories about—mostly about teenagers kind of like grappling with sexuality and gender. That one was really formative for me. And, uh, what else was there. 'Go Ask Annie' or something. You've heard of that one? Yeah, that was a good one! And just like, I unfortunately I also through that...because really a lot of the only trans things I could find were, like, kind of like medical or like I remember finding this book that was about this case of an

intersex person who had had, like, as a baby, had had, like, you know, adults perform like genital mutilation surgery on them in an attempt to give them a life that they thought that they would want. But I remember I was so upset and horrified by that story but there was also something in it that struck...yeah it's hard to explain that, like, it was upsetting but also, like, not like what I was looking for but it, like, hit something in my head, you know, that makes me remember it at least. And like DSM stuff. Which, you know, like...

Niculescu: You were reading the DSM in Middle School?

Bodian: I was flipping through it. Well once I had exhausted the downstairs of the library which was fiction, young adult, whatever, what have you, the upstairs is all the like, how do you say...kind of more like scholarly text, you know. It was like dictionaries, like, and just like—what do you call that? It has a name—the sign, it's like the boring part, it's like, 'Upstairs For The Boring Part'—oh but the other thing about the upstairs is that no-one was ever there so I'd take all my secret gay books and bring them to the upstairs part of the library, and read them there.

Niculescu: And this was the public library?

Bodian: Yes, this was the Half Hollow Hills Library in Dicks Hills, New York. So if anybody wants to go there and find any of the, like, I've definitely touched all of the books that have anything to do with, like, gender and sexuality. Yeah, but those were really the only things I could find on trans people and I remember also finding magazine articles that were just incredibly, like, sensationalized, like, garbage, you know, just like super exploitative and I was fascinated by them. And I would, like, read them over and over again but I don't know that that necessarily was a good thing or like a helpful thing and I also did not understand at all, like, why I was drawn to that.

Niculescu: So maybe, at what point were you able to start developing a vocabulary around transness.

Bodian: It took a really long time. Every time I ever tried to come out to anybody, like, once I started to, like, you know, feel like—'cause, you know, some of my earliest feelings of like really realizing that I, my like gender identity didn't match my like assigned gender, was just feeling like, 'Am I a boy? Like, I kind of feel that way, maybe...' I mean, that's baby me. [laughs] And I, pretty much, the first people I tried to tell that to, it was just like 'shhh', rejected. I was also, I remember at that point, I was 19 and I was in a very abusive relationship and when I told that person that that was how I was feeling it was horrible. It, like, really, like—I don't want to say backfired, because I didn't do anything wrong—but it like, really, like disturbed the person that I told, my partner at the time, and they were extremely upset and, like, retaliatory about it. And...so that was the first time I tried to come out to anybody. [laughs] So I was like, let's shove that back down there again and, I mean, that's what happened when I was kid too, you know, I tried to express to my parents, uh... OK, so this is also, like, 90s child, for sure, but, so, when I was in, I guess, early kindergarten or elementary school, my older brother Sam, who's three years older than me, was in Boy Scouts and my dad was the Troupe Leader, or he was one of the Den

Leaders—they call it Den Leaders—and we had the meetings in our basement and, like, I was, like, you know, I thought I was a boy scout. I was like ‘I’m a boy scout, I do everything that boy scouts do, that’s what I am’. And they tolerated it. ‘Cause it was like, ‘Sure this is a kid, you know. Like, we don’t...’ Like, it’s before they were, ‘It’s time for you to go do this now’. I remember, like, laying on the ground screaming and crying because I couldn’t go—and it’s like, it’s not even that sad, it’s just throwing a tantrum—but because I couldn’t go on camping trips with them and then, one year, maybe like second or third grade when it’s starting to be like ‘Ok, you’re too old for this now’, then they were like ‘It’s time to join the girl scouts,’ and I was, I was forcibly recruited to the girl scouts [laughs] and um I hated it. I hated it. At the time—girl scouts now is like super progressive—but at the time it was like ‘learn to clean’ and like ‘dress in like these like frilly socks’ and, like, bake brownies. And I was not about that. I did not like that. And like I think now, there was something that really disturbed me about being in girl scouts, and there was something that really disturbed me about losing the ability to be in boy scouts. That was probably like my first dysphoric experience, which again like is the most 90s experience - boy scout/girl scout dysphoria. What was the question?

Niculescu: Oh, starting to find a vocabulary for transness

Bodian: Oh right, because I had tried to come out but it didn’t—I was just, as an examp—like, and like—I tried to express to my parents that I wanted to like do boy things and wear boy clothes and be a boy maybe and they were just like, ‘Yeah, that’s not going to work out for you’. Like, ‘You should do this, we’re going to like throw away your boys clothes and things, like just don’t do that’. And, like, I feel like that is kind of like what happened to me a lot of times, like any time I tried to be like, ‘You know, I’ve shoved these feelings down for years and I’m starting to feel them again’, it was just like met with some sort of like, either, like, ‘Repress that’ or like horrified... So it took a really long time for me. I’m kind of a late bloomer anyway. But I, yeah, I really only started to like understand my own trans experience and be able to like talk about to myself and be able to talk about it to other people, probably like four or five years ago. So I was 23, about 22/23 and I feel like for the first year all I did was cry. [laughs] Like, the first, once I, I really, it really just like clicked for me and I was like ‘I think I’m trans,’ I really just, I would cry, I just would cry. And I, like, was really confused and I went back and forth a lot in terms of just like what I thought my identity might be and, like, it really took a long time for me, and I think a lot of that was just like healing past all of the, like, external and self-enforced like repression I went through. It took a long time, I mean it’s still taking a long time, I’m still up in it, but like to be able to like rationally talk to myself with like this vocabulary where I can like understand and kind of like process my own experience of gender and transness.

Niculescu: So like what happened, or what was in the kind of like lexicon 4 or 5 years ago that helped you develop that realization—I don’t want to say realization, but—

Bodian: I, oh my god, I like hate—honestly—so. [coughs] I was in a moment kind of like where like trans people were really having this blow up spotlight moment. It was the moment where like Caitlyn Jenner came out as being trans and that was, kind of like, what everyone was talking about. Like, just like, everyone, literally every single person—like how last year was sexual

assault, and like, you know like, sometimes it's the weather, like, and in that year it was Caitlin Jenner and that month, must have been like 2013, maybe, right? And I remember just like, the way that people were just like so casually and, kind of like, carelessly talking about trans people and trans experience was so deeply disturbing to me. And, kind of, in that like moment, in that feeling, I was—realized why it was so disturbing to me. And that it was because, like, I am trans. And like before that, kind of in the years leading up to it, I sort of had this casual 'I don't feel like a boy or a girl' kind of thing. But I was like 'Whatever though. That's fine and normal and doesn't mean anything and it doesn't mean anything to me, necessarily.' And that was kind of the moment where I was like, 'I'm swallowing all of this and, like, I can't do that anymore.'

Niculescu: So, four or five years ago, what point in your life were you at?

Bodian: Pretty similar point to now. Actually though, no, it was much worse. I was in this place, I had just broken up with the person that I was living with and so I needed to find a new apartment—

Niculescu: — in New York?

Bodian: In New York. OK, I've been living in New York since 2008. I grew up on Long Island but I went to school here and I've just lived here since then. So we're coming up on 10 years.

Niculescu: Yikes!

Bodian: [laughs] Yay. But no, it's great. Oh right, ok. I was breaking up with the person I was living with. And I had to move out and find a new apartment. But they were like, 'It's cool, no worries, you can stay here, you know like, while you find a new place'. And I have a cat and at the time, you know, they were like 'The cat can stay until you find a new place,' because I don't have anywhere to put the cat. I can couch surf, but my cat can't really. And I, my cat, she's a fearsome cat, she, I believe, jumped off my roof hunting birds, because she has just recently started bringing in birds that she'd caught outside, and she like shattered her leg—yeah, I know, sad. She's fine, her name's Sassy. She shattered her leg and it needed to be amputated and I cleaned out all my savings on like getting my cat this amputation, but also it was like, moving out. Oh my god, also I had just lost my job. It was a bad moment. Also, I was like—'I'm trans, question mark? What's happening?'. So that was kind of where I was at, at that time, and it led to a series of unfortunate apartment situations, because in New York it's never just one, unfortunate... it's like a rolling down the hill snowball effect of bad living and housing situations. And, yeah, that's where I was at. So, I was not like in a comfortable place. I was in this very, like, tumultuous like I-don't-know-what's-happening-to-me-really place, and uh, I kind of feel like—in my personal life but also in my trans life—I've just been like kind of recovering, from that year. Not like recovering, but kind of just like moving forward. And like, sometimes I feel like I'm digging myself out of a hole, and sometimes I feel like, 'No, I'm doing great'. And, uh, yeah. So that was that moment.

Niculescu: So, more just kind of like technically, you mentioned you'd been going to school in New York since 2008. Was that college?

Bodian: Yeah I went to FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology] for illustration. From 2008, I graduated in 2012.

Niculescu: And what was—not to like prod—but what was that job that you lost? What were you doing?

Bodian: Oh at that time—no, no prodding at all because I have no problem talking about it because it wasn't my fault—no I was, it was like literal downsizing, like the business is closed now. I was working as a millinery assistant, which is like a haymaking assistant, for this very small but kind of like prodigious like hat maker in New York. I don't know. Go figure. I was like, you know, fedoras and they have like the fancy little bows. I was sewing those bows and then sewing them onto hats for eight hours a day. It was cool. It paid well. I was the last person they hired, they were doing very poorly, they had to let me go. I was dating someone that I was living with, they had a really great job. They were like, don't worry, it's fine. We broke up. Um, yeah. So that was that job. Yeah, I've done a lot of odd jobs. I'm an odd job person. I'm an artist that also has, like, a million odd jobs.

Niculescu: Do you have, like, an artistic practice?

Bodian: Yeah I do, I do. It's—I'm in this place right now where I'm like it feels hard to talk about because it's so, like, superseded by my, like you know, need to, like, pay the rent and pay bills and buy food. So, I've pretty much, I—with the exception of the millinery job and some studio assisting stuff here and there—I've really been working in service since I started—since my second year of college. So like—oh but I'm supposed to be talking about illustration and I'm talking about, like, my horrible service experience. I know. Yeah, I do have a practice. I just finished my first book, 'cause—ok, so, my art is all very narrative, everything I do is very narrative-based. I like narratives. And so I finished—my whole life everyone's like 'Do a children's book, do a children's book'. And I'm like, 'No! I don't wanna do a children's book, I wanna do my own, whatever I want to do!' But I gave in and did a children's book. [laughs] Yeah, which is currently in, like, development hell right now. But it exists. Yeah, I recently, and in years where I'm just more hand to mouth than other years—which is this year—I mostly just try to draw and paint and it makes me happy, and not, like, really like, hurt myself over the fact that I'm not making enough or doing this, or like making this whole thing and I really just try to draw and enjoy it, like, when I want to.

Niculescu: So, maybe, thinking about this kind of like, these past couple of years of your life and talking more about the kind of vocabulary, what was your kind of first contact or what you considered to be the first moment you had a trans community around you?

Bodian: I, you know it's funny because a few things—they all kind of happen at once, you know, it's always like suddenly, like, you're there. And suddenly you have—I really did just suddenly have that community, I met through—so the job that I got after—everything I have I have through service, so I shouldn't really complain—the job that I got after I lost that millinery job, was a job

working at this cafe in Bed-Stay called Daily Press and that is where I met my friend Nora and my friend O—it, like, you know, a lot of trans and queer and LGBT people work in service, you know, it's like, it's not an ideal place for us but for any amount of reasons I could talk about, it's a place that we're like allowed to work and exist, you know. And like we kind of have the leeway to like express ourselves without being like either punished for it or, or you know also, like, those are jobs you can get without, you know, higher education. Those are jobs you can get on the sp—without having to go through this like vetting pro—you know, like, it's just, it's service. Like, whatever, we work in service. So, that was kind of like when I started to meet other people who were working in service who were other trans people, other queer people and that kind of just like opened up a new world for me, of, like, you know, meeting people who, who I felt seen by and who I felt like I saw them as somebody who was seen, you know? The, the, the mirroring cycles of seeing and being seen. That was, like, when I started to understand, like, the options that I had and the possibilities of what I could do. And like, how I could be myself.

Niculescu: I'm interested in maybe talking a bit more about like service and how, in this particular moment, it's place for like trans people to find some kind of income—if you had more thoughts about that?

Bodian: Yes, I do. So, like I said, I feel that service, although I've learned the hard way that it also is an extremely—like, you can kind of like get away with things that you couldn't necessarily in other settings, like, looking a certain way, dressing a certain way, speaking a certain way. So it's, like, an easier opportunity to get, like, you know, because we have—New York City has—like, has made an initiative to make the minimum wage congruent with the living wage, it's also an opportunity to, like, earn a living wage and be able to... And like, just a note on the living wage, I was thinking about it the other day and like, Living Wage doesn't mean 'living well wage'. Living Wage just literally means living wage, like, you can live. You can afford rent, you can afford food, you can afford to go to the doctor. But it's like an opportunity—it's, you know, especially in New York where every moment if you're not making money, you're desperate. Because, like, as soon as you don't make—you have one month. Like, that's the ticking time bomb. You have one month to continue to survive. And so, like, you know, the job search here is a really desperate place, and so service is that easy access, like 'Oh I can get that job and like, I don't have to be scared that...' Like, it's not that it's not discriminatory, because it is actually a very heavily discriminatory place, but just in terms of like... Because also, really like getting that job, it's not through people who own the place, it's through the people that work there. It's like 'oh, I know this queer person, this trans person who works at this cafe, you could go work with them,' and that's your in and you're gonna be somewhere with at least one other trans person. And so, like, that is some kind of safe environment for you. But it also is, is, like, a very I think challenging industry also so—for trans people because you're basically on display. You're so accessible to people and because of the structure of—the capitalist structure of it—I feel like you're kind of a part of the product that people are getting. And so, there's zero guarantee about how protected you're going to be by, you know, the people run your business and so it does really open you up to a lot of harassment and a lot of, just like, you know—I've never felt like it was, like, a dangerous experience, but a lot of really ranging from uncomfortable to painful experiences. Yeah I actually lost—I like have experienced also losing a job through that sort of, like, yeah I've lost a job to discrimination,

pretty much. In my mind...I don't, you know. So yeah, it's definitely like a double edged sword where like it's a way, especially right now, right now it's a very accessible way to survive, because it also really like traps you in that place because you're hand to mouth, you're just surviving, there's no safety net, and like it's really really hard to get out of that. And it's hard work. I don't think that people who haven't done it or who don't do it, they don't realize that it's really hard work. It's not just like standing around and like being like grumpy and pouring coffee. It's a *job*. And it's a hard job, especially depending on where you work and what you're doing. And, like, you really don't make a lot of money. You know, it's still legal in New York State at this moment to pay service workers less than minimum wage hourly. So, I do, at the moment I do make \$10 an hour which is not minimum wage.

Niculescu: Could you maybe, if you're comfortable, talk a bit about the moment you experienced losing your job to discrimination?

Bodian: So I worked at this place and I'm gonna say the name of it because, honestly, fuck them. This place, Sit and Wonder. It's this cafe in Prospect Heights on Washington and St Marks Avenue. And I had worked there for three years which in cafe years is a really long ti—in New York cafe years is a really long time. I had worked there for three years. And you know, like, for me, you know, a lot of being trans is a compromise, a lot of life is a compromise. I think there's a lot of compromises being made in my own identity and life. One of those compromises was that I sometimes confront people, you know, like regardless of—if someone's doing or saying something really not ok, unacceptable, I'll confront them. Not, like, you know in a way that is like—not cursing or calling them names. I'll just be like 'Hi that's a slur' or like 'That's really messed up, please don't say that' or like, 'Maybe you should think about, like, not doing that'. And I very much also personally believe that the barriers of 'You're at work, you shouldn't be able to tell people to stop using hate language...' Like, hate speech. I'm like, no, we're all people. This person can't just, like, be using hate speech and slurs because they're buying a \$2 cup of coffee. Like, that's not ok! And so I, in my former service life—and now it's different now because I'm scared, maybe—but in my former service life, I would, you know, be somewhat confrontational to people. Now I, we had—there was an employee. I say 'employee', really he was this guy who was a super for a bunch of the buildings on the block, including our block. And he was kind of the handyman of our business, and he was the eyes and ears to the owners—they had another more successful business in Fort Greene, so they weren't around a lot and he was, kind of like, their, kind of like, their grounding. He was an older guy in his late seventies. So, I mentioned before, when the, essentially like, talking about the weather, was talking about sexual assault, because that has come and gone. And also working in service, you interact with hundreds of people every day, you really kind of get the feel for what people are talking about. You're just really up in that. And so, this person, this man, was coming in every morning. He would come in while we were opening. It's like 6:30AM, like it's just you, your coworker and this person. And he'd come in and start talking shit. He'd be like, 'You know, these women, they're lying, they're liars, they're doing this for attention'. Like, 'It's such a shame that these men are losing their jobs and their power'. And just being like, 'Yeah they're, just basically, they're lying'—I think he said the words 'lying bitches'. And I, you know, it was going on for, like, weeks, I was like, 'Walk away, ignore it, if you engage with this person it's going to turn into something really bad'. And also this is a man that

can not at all stand to feel like people he sees as women—which is the way to include myself in that—he’s just like ‘I’m dominant, I’m dominant over you, if you do anything that challenges my power, like, I will, like, destroy you’. And so, I was ignoring, ignoring, ignoring it and one day I just couldn’t ignore it any more. And I tried to start off, I tried to, like, keep my cool. I was like—whatever—I tried to use some, like, logical argument about, you know... Oh ‘cause he was saying, ‘You know, why did they wait so long to talk about—why did they wait so long?’ And I was like, ‘Well, you know, at the time, that was not—like, there was no audience for that, you would not be believed, your career would be ruined. It would just totally backfire on you.’ And he started being like, ‘If you had a cut, why would you wait to go to the doctor?’. I was like ‘That’s not, that’s not the same thing’. And then he started going off saying ‘In the life of a female when she decides she doesn’t like something, and I know where that’s going where basically it’s just like, Women are like, later on I decided I wanted to get you so I’m going to lie and say that you raped me’. And I lost it. I was like, ‘If you can’t talk about how you sympathize with rapists—if you can’t *stop* yourself from talking about how you sympathize with rapists and are on the side of people who are rapists, then at least don’t talk about it in front of me’. And that was that, it was over, he walked out. And he—you know, I decided that I wasn’t going to take it to the owners, I was just ‘I’m going to see what he does. And that maybe he’ll just stop and maybe that’ll be the end of it’. He took it to them. He went to the owners. He went to the people who own this place—oh by the way, Sit & Wonder’s the name of the business—they bill themselves as a feminist space and a safe space and that’s like part of their whole thing. And they—I was called in for a disciplinary meeting a couple of days later where they told me that, you know—ok, they started it off by saying that one of the owners’ sisters is an activist and she was just in France and in France you can’t be they, you have to choose male or female. Which is the way they started off this disciplinary meeting which, like, I’d never really disclosed my trans status to them, they just assumed I used those pronouns from hearing other people use them for me. And so, for me, that’s the impulse of people to tokenize your own community’s suffering and then sell it back to you as social capital. Which happens all the time, but in that instance I was like ‘uh, you’re in charge of me’. But really I was just shocked and horrified and started crying immediately. Because I was just like ‘This is the worst. This is so [inaudible]. They had a meeting with me where they told me I was creating a hostile work environment and that I needed to, like, calm down, essentially, and that I didn’t seem happy there and, oh they kept repeatedly saying ‘we’re not the oppressors’ which if you find yourself repeatedly saying ‘I’m not the oppressor’ maybe you take a good hard look in the mirror. And I’m cry and I’m just trying to get out of this room because it’s just a room of me and these two people and they never asked me once what had happened or what I thought. They never directly said what it was about. That was it. And a week later they called me in again and said I’d been acting extremely inappropriately towards them, which, we don’t really know each other, but face value, I wasn’t. Like, maybe I wasn’t quite as friendly as I had been before, but I wasn’t doing anything that could be seen as inappropriate or not acceptable, like, workplace behavior and they fired me. And so, yeah, I lost that job. Which is how I was in the place I was in before this. Now I’m in whole other shitshow situation, which is this place in Brooklyn which formerly is supposed to be essentially a cafe that’s a safe space for queer people, a safe space for black people, a safe space for people of color and for trans people, and is kind of in the process of becoming...*not* that. I’ll just say. And also doesn’t pay its workers

minimum wage. But, yeah, that's the service world. But, again, I've met so many incredible people through it and also it's a way for me to survive, you know. So, that's what that is.

Niculescu: I'm interested in talking a bit how you mentioned that you know Elroy Red?

Bodian: Oh yeah I do know Red. I love Red. She's one of my favorite people. I actually met her at the place that I'm working at now. I think, like, maybe the second or third time we were working together we were listening to SZA and kind of like grinding a little bit behind the counter and she turned to me and she was like, 'Can you believe that we didn't work together before? Can you believe that we didn't know each other?' And I was like, no. So we met—I mean it's just one of those, you know, you just meet another trans person and it's just a love connection and you're just like, 'I love you'. Which is such a great feeling. So, yeah, we worked together and we were very quickly like, let's also do things that are not just us working together. Let's spend time together. And yeah, so we do. And she's very inspiring to me.

Niculescu: And so, what did those things outside of work entail?

Bodian: Honestly we would mostly just decompress together because again, the place that we're in is a very stressful environment and especially became an incredibly stressful environment for her, and so we would either kind of just like, hang out in the park and be sad until we weren't. Or like, we you know like go out, get a drink, stuff like that. It has been—we've only known each other for like three or four months, and we're both kind of like in weird, transitory periods. But yeah we—I think, on several occasions have gone to Happy Fun Hideaway together which is a queer bar in Bushwick and, yeah, I've gone to, let's see, last time I saw her, I saw her on her birthday, which was on Monday, but before that we were together at, there was a, you all were there—the Trans Oral History Project was there—at The Centre, the Manhattan location of the The Centre, it was like a, kind of like a get together before the trans day of action. And I kept calling it the Trans Job Fair. [laughs] It was so nice, I had such an amazing time, and my friend Charlie was there, and our friend Dante who just moved to New York. It's just always like so much, such a good feeling to go to trans spaces and just be seeing the people that you know and the places—like Apicha was there. I go to Apicha. Apicha had some people there. Apicha is like the—so there's Callen Lorde which is the NYC Community LGBTQ+ trans & hiv-centred health organization. And I had initially thought that I would go there but it's a little bit overloaded, understandably. They have a large amount of patients and things. So, Apicha is kind of like, it's like the other one. It's smaller. It's in Chinatown. And I think they actually did just open up a Brooklyn location, maybe, but yes that is where I go for my doctor. General and trans-related healthcare. Oh, Red, at The Centre, she performed her poem, her poems. One I remember was titled Two for Tea, I don't remember what the other one was. But it was really fantastic and we all ate food that was made by Charlie. And made like banners and signs. I made this giant flag. It was really great. And then we all like went to the march, to the like Rally location together, then marched. Yeah.

Niculescu: So you mentioned having El Roy Red, having Charlie. Besides like Red, how did you encounter this? Was it also the service industry? Or just offshoots...

Bodian: Yeah, offshoots. One of my best best friends who was with me at the—who I am trying to get them to do an interview, and they're like 'If I hear my voice, my soul will exit my body'. I'm chipping away. I'm chipping away. I'm like, 'Cool me too, I'm never going to listen to this'. Please know that if you are listening to this, that I've never listened to this. And so, that friend is somebody I went to school with actually and we weren't friends before either of us were out and now we kind of have this really incredible co-supportive relationship where we are both supporting each other through our transitions and like, we're at different stages but it's one of the healthiest adult relationships I have and I treasure that. And then—oh, my little sister is trans, which we talked about that a little bit. She lives in Ohio at the moment, she goes to Oberlin, so we don't see each other very often. Yeah, just like through service, through friends—I, my partner is in this band that's like a New York-based band that is very much a part of the queer scene and so like those are my dads, like, those three people are people I, like, part of the chosen family. They're my family. And so I've just made a ton of friends through that. And yeah, just through places I'm at in my life. Service. School. Other friends. And then also, you know, just spending time in trans spaces and queer spaces and then you see the same people and you're like, 'Let's exchange information, like, let's do stuff'. And you know, I feel like that, as I'm getting older, is becoming more and more where I'm finding my people, where I'm finding support. Where I'm finding friends.

Niculescu: So, which queer and trans spaces in particular, do you tend to frequent?

Bodian: I, ok let's see, right now I feel like I'm following y'all like a band, like following your tour. Hi again! No but seriously I love your organization. I'm excited to like do stuff with you. Bars, friends houses. I think probably the most like official trans spaces I'm a part of are like activist spaces. Like just being at rallies, showing up for events. And also, like, being at the Centre for things and like 'Oh there's gonna be this panel or there's gonna be, like, this organizing meeting' and just seeing people there. You really do just see everyone, everyone's there. So there's that. Other than that it's just socially, really, parties, people's houses, bars, what have you, bedrooms...

Niculescu: You mentioned activism. Would you want to talk about that a bit more?

Bodian: Yeah sure. I'm not really an organizer of activism. Kind of like, my current role is just centered around showing up. And, like, not just showing up for, like, my community but like also showing up for all of the communities that are, like, facing, like, oppression and facing like state-instituted oppression. So really I show up. I also try to let know the people who are in my life that I am there for you, and not just in a, like, 'I'm there for you'—I'll do whatever you need. So, for me, it's, like, adding my voice, adding my body, just like adding my, whatever I have to give. Adding my money. Not that, like, donating money, like, makes you a good person. But like, I try to very consciously know the org—for every issue, like know three organizations that not only can I contribute to, but that also if somebody's like 'Oh isn't it horrible such-and-such thing', I'm like 'Yes well if you could please donate to Care'. And just like educating myself. Doing the work to educated myself. I think a big thing that—a big feeling that I have is that people often, like, demand to be educated on the spot with the labour of the people who are in, like, marginalized

groups and that everything you could hear from that person, and more, is available to you by folks who have put their voices out there already and that you can—wow! you can do the work! find those voices and educate yourself, so weird!—and that, so that’s something that’s very important to me, is educating myself and then also, like, educating others. Except that I cut myself a break in all trans-related issues because that’s an emotional well-being, mental health dichotomy, of course.

Niculescu: I don’t know, I think—is there anything else you’d like to add?

Bodian: Not really, that’s a pretty blanket—we hit a lot of topics. No there’s nothing I’m like dying to tell you.

Niculescu: Well, I guess, one last question. Just to have like a forward-facing end to the interview... What are you excited about in your life right now?

Bodian: I’m excited for the future. [laughs] I’m at a place where I finally feel comfortable with myself and, like, I finally have an idea of what I want to do—in a lot of ways—in terms of transition, and that’s exciting to me, because... I guess I really am talking about, like, transition, which is like, I feel like I’m in a place where I’m finally going to let myself have that. I feel like I’m not—I’ve finally shut some of my fear that I’ve always carried with me... Oh you know what, there is one thing, which is that I kind of have this thought that a lot of what I’ve tried to overcome in just like becoming my authentic self and love and proud of myself is, like, this fear of not being enough. And I’m sure that that’s a very human fear but I’ve also encountered that it’s a very trans fear. And I’m not sure if it’s because people—because there’s not a place for us, you know, like, that we’re afraid, or that we think we’re not enough to have that place, or to take that place, or to have that space and so, I’m excited to, like, feel like, you know I might not ever completely overcome that, but to feel like I’m working on it in myself and working on it in my own community. So that is something to look forward to.

Niculescu: That’s awesome. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to sit down with me.

Bodian: Yes, thank you. Thank you so much for doing this and bye.