

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

CHANEL LOPEZ

Interviewer: Sebastián Castro Niculescu

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Transcribed by Rosalynn Garcia

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Sebastián Castro Niculescu: Hello, my name is Sebastián Castro Niculescu and I will be having a conversation with Chanel Lopez 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 July 31st, 2018 and this is being recorded at the New York Public Library Offices in Midtown Manhattan. Hi Chanel.

Chanel Lopez: Hi Sebastián.

Niculescu: [laughs]

Lopez: How are you?

Niculescu: I'm doing well, how are you?

Lopez: Good. Good. Good.

Niculescu: How was your day?

Lopez: My day was pretty good. I was in an inner faith retreat from the Unity. That's all. It's been pretty laid back today. I'm chill.

Niculescu: That's nice. I guess just to get started. Where are you from and what was it like growing up, where you're from?

Lopez: Well, I was born and raised here in Manhattan. Back then it was called Spanish Harlem, now it's called East Harlem. Actually, it was called El Barrio. I was born in Metropolitan Hospital. I was raised all my life up until like the age of like 15. No, bitch.. about 12. Then I was going back and forth to like Boston, with my father. Because my mother and father divorced at a young age. When I was around like 3, 4. I was always going back and forth and I lived for three years in the Dominican Republic. And growing up I had such a, I don't recall having the best childhood. I feel like I was deprived from a lot of things that a child would normally enjoy or go through. Especially like living in my fathers, in Dominican Republic with my fathers' family. You know, being this, I was always feminine and that was my, my-- It wasn't my issue, my problem. It was my family's issue and problem with me. Because they didn't understand why I was so feminine. Why I walked so feminine. Why I didn't say hello, you know very masculine I was very feminine when saying hello. You know my mother was going through her second marriage. She was focused on that and on work and stuff like that. I was sent to my fathers and then my father left me in Boston with my stepmom! And he left to Dominican Republic and ended up marrying his long-time sweetheart. I had to finish middle school in Boston. It wasn't the best time there either. And then I was sent to Dominican Republic. Growing up, it hasn't, it hasn't, I don't know. I look at some of the kids now, or like the kids back then. And I'm like I wish I could've gone to my high school reunion, or my graduation, or my prom. I feel like I was just taken away from all that. Growing up it wasn't very, it wasn't easy for me at all. Especially being feminine and growing up in a Christian

home with machismo from my fathers' side; and my mothers' side. My mother was always like "no don't walk like that, don't act like that". And I had my grandmother, my grandfather of course, but my grandmother always was very accepting. My mother was the one that had a hard time dealing with it in the beginning. It was more because she thought she did something wrong. Yeah, I remember being five years old; walking around the house in heels while nobody was watching. Or locking myself in the bathroom, taking out the dirty laundry, the sheets, and tying it around as a dress and playing with makeup in the bathroom... I was playing "ahh I'm taking a shower." You know? But it was, I wish I had the talk that I see a lot of kids encounter. But I was very sheltered. My life was very much; I'm going to school, home, church, church, home, school. That was the only time I really got to go out and enjoy myself, was if it was a church activity going on. Or a church trip. And you know yeah. [inaudible] That was me growing up.

Niculescu: You're living in El Barrio, until 15?

Lopez: No, I lived in El Barrio up until, I want to say 11. And then between 11 and 13 I was back and forth; New York, Boston, Boston, New York. One year I was in Boston, one year I was in New York. I was never settled in one place and then when I turned 13, I ended up going to Dominican Republic. And since it was just not the best experience. I ended up coming back when I was 16.

Niculescu: Okay and you mentioned like church activities being a big part of your upbringing, or the ways you got to go out?

Lopez: It was the only way that I was able to go out, like if it was somebody's wedding, if it was somebody's sweet sixteen, if it was the church's function. Anything that had to do with church that was the only time I knew I was going to be able to have fun.

Niculescu: Okay, okay, and what church did you go to in El Barrio?

Lopez: They closed actually. It was a church, it was called Holly Agony and go figure the name. [Laughs]

Niculescu: Oh wow, oh my god [laughs].

Lopez: [Laughs] Yeah but I was born and raised in that church actually. I prepared kids for their first communion, their baptism, their confirmation. I did all of that. I was even an altar boy. [Laughs] My mother even wanted me to be a priest, and I, at one point was like "I wanna be a priest!" [Laughs].

Niculescu: Wow and what was growing up in El Barrio like, outside of just like the church functions? What was school like there?

Lopez: Oh, school was horrible. I remember getting jumped constantly and bullied all the time. Especially, especially in junior high school, which was the local junior high school that everyone went to. And I remember, always like having a fear of going to school because everyday I was

being bullied for being feminine. I was being bullied because all I did was hang out with girls. I was being bullied just for the way I dressed because I was never the kid that dressed up to date like everyone else. It was always a constant bullying. I went through my whole junior high school, well I should say part of middle school, and junior high school...bullied. I remember like in middle school living in Boston, I had to- do you know they had this thing where the girls go on the girls' line and the boys go on the boys' line. And of course I went to the boys' line and then I would get- I remember one this kid making fun of me talking about "you're in the wrong line." And I'm like "what are you talking about?" "You belong in the girls' line" Because I was always very feminine. Even- growing- sometimes I wish I took corn rolls back then in middle school. Because I think my life would've been totally much different. You know- but I, I was- even that was just a process of- I dreaded school. I dreaded school every day, straight through my junior high school years. My high school years wasn't so bad. You know I really was quiet, silent, in a corner. I was that one kid you probably thought that was gonna bomb the school. [laughs] Or go... crazy shooting. You know what I'm saying cause I was always in the corner. Like I didn't have any friends, you know I had a lot of friends in junior high school, but because I graduated a year early. Everyone else graduated on time. I left junior high school and I ended up going to high school first and it was just very- like I was just very- very... I really never had friends.

Niculescu: How did you get to finish a year early in junior high?

Lopez: I forget, I think I took a test or something like that. I'm not really sure how that happened. But I know that, like all my friends, for some reason I was- I ended up graduating. I have a vivid recollection, about that, you know what I mean, that word. [laughs] but that I ended up graduating. And it was, you know, it was fine. High school years like I said I was very sheltered, very quiet, very into myself. I did meet this one person that till this day we're like best friends. I will never forget her. We- we caused havoc, but she was- she was like a- as they call a "fag hag." And she had a gay friend, that they lived in the same block, they lived together in the Bronx. You know they were best friends and stuff like that. And she one day called me over and we started talking. She's like "Are you gay?" and I was like "Why are you asking?" You know, but I never considered myself gay. I've never felt that I was gay at all. I've always felt like a woman all the way. And even growing up at like my grandmas' when I was of age, like around my 20's, I would like go to some of my friends that I had across the street and I would like dress up and go to the clubs with them dressed up or hang out. I was always- everyone knew me in the block though. Because you know, you were on a 4-radius block and everyone in those projects grew up together. Like I knew that like anyone from 103rd street to 96th street, we all knew each other. Yeah, I did have a group of friends, but that back- was like my late 20's already, like 22- 23. Cause I ended up living with my mother- my grandmother from the age of like 16- No from the age of like 18 to 22 I lived with my grandmother.

Niculescu: Okay, okay. If you don't mind, can we maybe backtrack a little bit? Talk about your time in the Dominican Republic. If you want to?

Lopez: Yeah, it's fine. You know... you have 10 uncles and aunts. Old fashioned. You know set in their ways. And here is like this kid who's the black sheep of the family. Cause it's like, you know

all my uncles and aunts they grew up together, and then their kids grew up together, and I grew up with their kids my cousins but I didn't have that close-close bond like the rest of them had and like till this day they have. I do have like one or two cousins that- really, really like talk to me and look for me, and I look for them you know. Her birthday was actually on Saturday. [Laughs] We're like- were like a year apart. Now that was the cousin that I felt like- she always had my back. And we always- we was always together. And because it so happened that around the same year that I was sent to Dominican Republic, she also was sent to Dominican Republic cause she was from New York. The first year and a half- the first year that I was living in Dominican Republic, she wasn't there. I was just isolated. I was just like always isolated because every time I went- it was the tradition was; every night my father, my stepmom, and my little brother would get in the car and they'll head to the next town. That's where my other uncles lived, my grandmother may she rest in peace, my grandfather, may he rest in peace. But every time I went it was like a constant like nit-picking at me and I got to a point where I was just like "no I don't want to go down there I'll just stay in the house." I used to stay in the house by myself. You know- isolated and uh until my cousin got there like a year later and then everything was like "hey!" you know, we was like we was up and down and I- she was sort of my comfort zone. And that was [car honking] like the only cousin that I can say that we have a close relationship. All my other cousins love them to death, but we don't have a close relationship. But you know living in Dominican Republic wasn't the best. I remember running out to the payphone, cause back then it was payphones, and I didn't even wanna call from the phone in the house. But I remember running, I don't know what had happened, but I remember going to the payphone calling my grandmother collect and just pouring my eyes out telling her "I can't live here anymore, I don't like the way I'm treated, you know I feel isolated." You know It was always like "oh you need to be more manly, you need to be this and you need to be that" and I was just over it. And my grandmother came like the week after went and picked me up, she went to Dominican Republic and she's like, "I'm taking him back" and that's how I ended up coming back at the age of 16, 17, 16 yeah. I was turning 16 when I came back from DR. but it was like I said my uncles were very, my aunts are very strict, my uncles are very machista and you know having the grandma, the grandmother and the grandfather that I had. My grandfather was very laid back though. That's one thing I can say my grandpa was always like telling my grandmother "Leave those kids alone..." [laugh] "you always messing with them!" "Leave them alone" and he would tell like my uncles, my father, and my aunt like "leave those kids alone they are young." He was always like the one on our side. [Car horn] But it was it was just too tormented for me. I was just like "no I'm coming back to New York"

Niculescu: Your grandma came and picked you up?

Lopez: She picked me up. I spent the night- we spent the night at one of our aunts' house from her side and then we ended up going to the airport and I never went back to Dominican Republic.

Niculescu: Oh wow.

Lopez: Yeah. I want to go. Well actually I'm planning on going next summer. For my birthday.

Niculescu: Oh wow. Okay. Are you looking forward to that....?

Lopez: I am but I'm not going to stay with any of my family. I'm gonna stay in the town- close to where I used to live which is like a tourist place, were going to get like an Airbnb or something. Cause my cousins are going too.

Niculescu: But it sounds like you have like a pretty strong relationship with your grandma. The one that came to...

Lopez: Yeah- I've always- my grandmother basically helped my mother raise me. You know while my mother was at work and out- you know my grandmother basically quit her job cause I used to have a babysitter and the babysitter was abusive towards me. My grandmother ended up quitting her job because she was like I don't want nobody taking care of you. She ended up quitting her job and she raised me, and she raised my other sister while my mother went to work.

Niculescu: Wow and what was your mom doing for work?

Lopez: I forget- I think she was doing like a quality assurance or something like that. She worked for Mount Sinai hospital for many years. First, she took a- I remember her taking a computer course I used to show up because it was right near the neighborhood. I used to show up to her computer classes and then she got a job at Mount Sinai and she worked there for over for like 15-20 years. I was like 16 when she was working at Mount Sinai. She just retired. She went on disability like- I want to say like 5 years ago. I'm going to be 43 next month. But I always had a close relationship with my mom. She was the first one that I actually told that I was, that transitioned.

Niculescu: When was that?

Lopez: I wanna say I started transitioning around 34-35. I was about 35 years old when I started transitioning. Not too long ago.

Niculescu: You mentioned that you went to live with your grandma. From the age of like 18?

Lopez: From the age of like 18-22. 23 I ended up staying with my grandmother and the reason I moved was because I felt like I wasn't going to be able to transition. Cause I used to like leave and like stay in Brooklyn in my friends' house for the weekend and like as soon as I used to go to his house on a Friday 'cause he was trans now he's back to being [inaudible]. At the time transitioning, I would go to their house on a Friday and just totally get dressed for the whole weekend. And just live my life as a woman that weekend. It was like I was living a double life and then I was like "I can't keep living like this" you know- like I'm not happy and my mother was under the impression that I was going to find a wife, get married, have kids. I was like you know what no this is going to like- I ended up leaving my grandmas at around the age of 24-25 and I still didn't transition then because I was working for the board of education. And back then being trans wasn't so- so accepting like it is now, even though we still got struggles. But it wasn't as accepting as it is now and working in a high school, I was like I can't transition while I'm working

in a high school- you know. And because these kids are gonna make my life a living hell- you know. When I ended up getting laid off I just went on public assistance. But then I met my friend she said 'I used to dress up' and she's like "why don't you just transition?" and I'm like "I've always wanted to but I don't know how" and she actually taught me like how to dress and where to go. She took me to the clinic, and I started getting on hormones and stuff like that. I transitioned for 5 years I wanna say- under the table like I would still go to my family's house and wear- I used to wear Old Navy clothes because Old Navy clothes is like gender neutral clothes. That was my go-to place every time I wanted to go shopping and because I was like- ok you can wear the jeans and the nice top and they're not gonna say anything and I'll just have a scarf around me- around my head. But after that I was just like I can't- because I started getting into shows also. I started performing and stuff like that and I met my- my mom from the scene that I owe so much to her. She took me under her wing and she practically made me the woman I am today. She's pretty famous too. Her name is Jessica Fox, she used to be like the big diva for over 22 years. But she now lives a very well life- she goes to work- she goes home, yeah....

Niculescu I'm interested in a lot of things that you just said. But to start off maybe like I'm interested in like about the double life and how you used to get dressed up and go to clubs. And like what that was like and if there was any kind of memories you have of that.

Lopez: Yeah, I do. I have memories of- I remember starting to perform at the club. Well I used to go across the street to my friends' house. She was very accepting. There was a building where like everyone got along. They all knew each other well, they all fought too. There was like 3-4 floors where everyone knew each other in that whole building and like come holidays it was like everybody- that became kind of like my second home. We didn't go to clubs a lot but when we started going to the club I would like to run to their house and like do my makeup put on my hair. I used to look horrible [laughs] I used to look horrible now I look at the pictures and I'm like what the hell was I thinking about?!?! [laughter]. And I remember like going to the clubs, I remember also going to gay street down in the village and like dressing up in the alley and going into Pieces. Cause I used to perform at Pieces, that's where I first started performing at; Pieces. I used to remember going to there because I wanted people to think that I was able to leave my house like that. You know- that I was, had the support of, had this invisible support in my head. And I remember also like coming home one night and it was like freezing cold and I didn't have keys and I had all this makeup on. I had to go into the staircases, change into my male clothing and knock on the door and hide my face and be like "oh my god its freezing outside". But it was because I didn't want nobody to see my face and my makeup. It was like I just felt like living that double life was too much for me. I was a woman when I didn't go visit my family; my mother, my father, my grandmother. When I didn't visit them, I was very gender neutral that's how I went to the house and, but I felt uncomfortable and stuff at that and people started noticing when I started taking the hormones. People was like "you're looking different" and I was like "What you mean?" and like "Your face is looking more feminine" and I didn't- you know I used to be like "Oh I don't know what you're talking about" but it was because I was on, I was taking hormones "I was like no, no I don't know what you're talking about" and stuff like that. And then it was one of my grandmas' home attendant; who we sat down and we started talking and she said "Your grandmother loves you, she accepts you for who you are. You need to stop hiding." I had an

album of me dressed up as a woman doing shows and stuff like that and I left it on purpose on the table. Yeah, I left it on the table and told the home attendant. I told the home attendant I said like "I left the album on the table on purpose" she looked at it and then the home attendant showed her and was like "oh look, how nice your granddaughter looks" and my grandma was like "yeah she looks nice". She was just taken back about it by a little because she was like, like you know she didn't- she was taken back a little. Then after a while she came around and she was like "oh you know that's my grandchild I'm gonna accept them no matter what and they still have- they have a place in my heart always." Once she went with it, I was just like "the hell with this- I'm going to change my name and I'm gonna just live my life and there's still people from my church that haven't seen me yet. They have- but I wanna say like 60 out of 40 have seen me already because you know Facebook connects everyone. Everyone has found me through my mother or through my sisters and they'll tell my mother "is that?" and my mother's like "yeah" and they'll say, "wow she looks good" So yeah....

Niculescu: How did you get stuck at performing and what were you performing?

Lopez: When I used to- well I've never been a specific artist. Like I never mimic any artist, I have like whatever songs in that's the one I perform and that's how I met Jessica Fox (my mom). Because I used to- when I used to go to Brooklyn and dress up there was a club called Krash, at the time I don't know if you've ever heard of it. But Krash was like very- it was thee club. Like people would come down from Connecticut go to this club named Krash. It was constant battle between Escuelita and Krash, Krash, Escuelita. But they always had the folly's, they had the girls, they had everything. My friend that I used to stay with in Brooklyn on weekends told me; "Why don't you- let's go to Krash" and I'm like "Krash? What's up with that" and she- they explained to me "that no that's the club everybody goes to, it's fun, you meet the boys" I was like "Come on let's go." And when I saw Jessica Fox on stage perform like I was mesmerized I was like- I need to be up there, like this is me and I kept going after that we would go like every Friday, every Saturday and then I started meeting- I started getting close to people that performed and then I started- I went one day to the backstage and I was introduced to Jessica and I told her- I was like "oh my god I admire you so much and I always- wanted to ask if you wanted to be my mom" and you know she was like "yes, you know I feel a spiritual connection with you" and we ended up being- to this day we don't talk as much as before because you know we both got our separate lives but that is still my number one and that's where I met her and she got me on stage one day to perform after that; like I still perform here and there but usually in the summertime its where I'm more busy than in the winter. And I'm not- I don't perform as much because...it's not like it used to be, here, they don't really appreciate a trans woman performing unless you're half naked. And they appreciate more drag queens, that's why- [car horn] and you know a lot of the promoters want you to put a production for them, but they don't want to pay you production money. I was like "you know what the hell with this I'll do it here and there" but it's not like I live off of it you know. But I love performing, I love being on stage, you know it, I love the attent- I'm a Leo, Leo's love attention. We love to be the center of attention. But I definitely uh, that's one thing. Back then I said to myself; I am going to live my life as a showgirl I'm just sleep all day and I'm just gonna go do my shows and live off of that. But then I was like oh. When I started, I- I started getting into that scene when it was already starting to like to fade away and the clubs

were starting to shut down. You know I was a regular on Stonewall. I used to perform at Stonewall every- like my schedule was really back to back. Like Mondays' and Fridays', I was at Stonewall. Tuesdays' I was at Splash. Wednesdays I was at Heaven. You know- Thursdays I was sometimes every other Saturday I was at Escuelita. You know I did get to perform in Krash a couple of times, but- it's like the club scene started fading after that. I was on it for like a good, I was on a good run for like 5 years straight. But then it just started falling off.

Niculescu: And what years was that around?

Lopez: I was like in my late 20's, early 30's. I was doing- yeah, I would say around 30. 12, maybe 10 years ago.

Niculescu: And what was the scene like? What kinds of people?

Lopez: The scene is shady. [laughter] The scene is very shady. It's very- If you don't look. My sisters Jasmine International. And- me and her got close and there was like, people tried to put us against each other. And it was very much like "You need to be like her, you need to have body" You know cause there's always been this thing that if you're a trans woman you have to be surged out and you have to look like a barbie. And I'm gonna to get my surgeries done, but not because society tells me I need to go get my surgeries done. I'm doing it because I want to feel comfortable with myself and I want to do it. You know, it's like the scene is very shady, is very shady, and is easy to get hooked on drugs. Cause I, myself would say I was hooked on drugs for a while. I was living in abandoned buildings and I didn't like- you know I was just at a point where like.... I was like almost near overdosing. You know and it's because depression hit, you know I thought I was in love, and that person wasn't it. It all came crashing down. From the age of 33 to the age of I wanna say 38 those years were really rough, those were like the roughest years ever.

Niculescu: And Jessica Fox? How was she as a mother? What did she like help you with?

Lopez: She always demonstrated to me. She always said. Like I am the type of person that would listen to what others said and I would let it affect me. And I'm not going to use the words that she used but she said "You can't let these guys- you know the scene, uh affect you this way. And you can't listen to 'em. You are who you are, and you don't let no one change you." You know and she always said "You're special, you have a beautiful soul." She always always took me under her wing. And she stuck up for me like in a way that like I never saw other people stick up for me. And now you know, now my teeth are fixed but back then I had a lot of missing teeth and my teeth was crooked- one because of the drugs, two; because I was in an abusive relationship. I was like- you know, people would make fun of my teeth "Oh she had missing teeth, oh she got crack too, she's got-" you know it was always something, you know I had a five o'clock shadow cause I never went through laser. It was like- everything was just like- it was always the criticism from the gay scene. And I see them till this day now and it's "Like wow you look so different!" and usually I'll just say "Thank you" and I just keep walking because you know I'm the type of person that I can forgive you, but I will never forget. And being in the backstage of Escuelita was very shady. You know these gay boys are shady, and they are, they are trifling and backstabbing.

You know and- and a lot of them- and being a showgirl was also not easy because everyone gravitated to you because it was like “Oh these are the girls that get you in the cut for free; you hang out with them, oh they get drink tickets, oh they know where to get the drugs,” you know. We had those types of people around us all the time. Like me, I always had the guy that sold us drugs, I always had my drink. It was always- you know I had the money. It was like that scene was easy to [inaudible]. And Jessica always my mom Jessica always warned me too like these, fucking I won’t say the word, but she’s like “These guys, these gay boys, will try to use you!” And they did some of them actually did until I woke up. And then I like, I had friends that would call me. Oh, what you doing tonight girl? And I’m like “nothing.” “Do you have a show?” I’m like “Yeah I have a show” or I’ll be like “No I got invited to this club” and they’ll be like “Oh can I go with you, you know I don’t money but I wanna go out” and I’m like “Ok” but then when you got to the club you wanted drugs, you wanted free drinks and I’m like no. Then when I met Jasmine, Jasmine would be like “Girl, let them go on their own. Notice how they only call you when they want something or when they want to go out” I tested that. I was like you know what she’s- let me test that. And when I started telling people meet me at the club, then people started fading away. And that was fine. [Laughs]

Niculescu: How did you end up meeting Jasmine?

Lopez: I met Jasmine at a club performing with her, at Krash. It was performing, and we got really close after that. She moved to Florida. Now were like very- you know we’ll say hi to each other here and there, but yeah. Life for me is way different now I got to say than when I would say like say 30-33. You know I’m more conscious of like, what friends should look like, shouldn’t look like, and I’m okay with not having people around me too much. Like before I used to be like “Oh my god like I want to walk with an entourage” you know, but I’m ok with not having that. Now I hang out with one person, this is like my son, my best friend, my sister, my brista, my brother’s sister. It’s like this person you know is like the only person I confide in. I talk to them and it’s because they had demonstrated their loyalty towards me. It’s like I’m okay with having one friend instead of having 20 acquaintances.

Niculescu: That makes sense. And I think a lot of people like talk about club scenes as a good community. But it’s really like not that simple.

Lopez: It’s not. The club scene and the gay scene can be very vicious. It can be very vicious. Well back then, cause like now, like the clubs are shut down. You know Escuelita closed, XL closed. All these clubs have closed. Safe 48 here and there but you know. Now you get bar-clubs, like you wanna go, now the party is at the bar, it’s not like before like you go to an actual club.

Niculescu: And what were the club spaces like? What did it feel like to be in there?

Lopez: They were good. Krash, Krash when they were in Steinway Queens it was a nice huge space. They actually turned it to a titty bar now. But then they had moved to this place on 23rd street called the Ole Pole and their place, that place was gorgeous and beautiful. I missed Krash when it was there, it was down in the city on 23rd street. And then you know Factory closed down.

That was like the place to go and it's like the club scene back then, the space was you know, good. Then Morocco was good, but they closed it too. It's like you really don't have nowhere to hang out anymore [laughs] unless you just want to go to a bar.

Niculescu: Yeah, it's a totally different landscape.

Lopez: Yeah. Everything is totally different. The club scene is not like back then. I mean I used to be in Escuelita every day. When Krash closed, I used to perform in Escuelita like Friday, Saturday, mostly Saturdays and Sundays. And yeah, but I was always there. That was the place to always be at.

Niculescu: And where was Escuelita?

Lopez: Escuelita was actually on 39th street between 8th and 9th.

Niculescu: Oh wow.

Lopez: Yeah and that's where me and Jasmine got really close because we used to go every day, every night to perform. We always were booked together and stuff like that but yeah. But then they closed that club down. I don't know what they made it now. And then the owner moved his party to XO. But then they closed it, then he was killed.

Niculescu: Oh wow.

Lopez: The party life here is gone. Now it's very much let's go to a rooftop. [Laughter] Let's go to the, I think the party is at a rooftop now.

Niculescu: Hotel rooftops.

Lopez: Yeah hotel rooftops till like 11. [laughter] but yeah...

Niculescu: And before that you mentioned working with the Department of Education?

Lopez: Yeah, I used to work for the Department of Education way back before I started transitioning back in my middle 20's, late 20s I was working with the board of that. I used to be a school aid and I started... Everything was fine when I worked at Martin Luther King Junior High School which was the old high school at the time because I knew everyone I had actually graduated from there. I used to go to school from there also. Actually, I graduated from [inaudible] school. I used to go to that school I went there for like 3 years. And I was a school aid there but then things started happening; they transferred me. Then I got transferred into my old junior high school funny enough. But it wasn't the whole administration, it was, don't know what was going on, the whole mix up and stuff like that. But then- I ended up going to a school in the Bronx with a principle that never got along with me, we never got along. Which just so happened to be that the principle was the boss when I was a school aid at my old high school, and then he

got transferred out of there and he was put into a school in the Bronx. And it just so happened that I ended up being in the same school and there was a lot of- like one day I got into some trouble. I didn't report it and it was, but I didn't report it because we still didn't have, I was on trial. But it was- it had nothing to do with me. When they found out that I was innocent they dropped the charges and stuff like that. But the reason that they let me go is because I failed to report it. That I had gotten arrested, and I got arrested and I spent one night. That's why they said you didn't report it. That was a problem. So yeah...

Niculescu: And what were you doing in the schools?

Lopez: I was the school aid. Basically, I would be like the lunch monitor. I would be downstairs. Which is weird because like in my school years I was like isolated and it didn't feel any different when I was a school aid either. I was like "ugh- "and I was always like "I don't want to be here," like leave me in an office working with paperwork and stuff like that but they would put me in the classroom. They would put me in the detention classroom to watch all the kids. You know, being a school aid in the school system, it's not the most respected position. I don't know how it is now. But yeah, being a school aid is not respected the way it should be.

Niculescu: You mentioned like facing some encounter with the police...

Lopez: Yeah. I was hanging out with this guy who was actually doing false checks and I didn't know. He claimed it was a company. And I was cashing the checks for him. I knew something was up, but I really didn't pay attention to it back then because I was a little naïve. And the cops caught on and they arrested me. They asked me questions, but I really didn't know what was. They thought I was making the checks and they thought I was like- but I was like "no I don't have a check- how do you even begin to make checks?" It caught up but the person that actually did it took the blame was like "She really didn't have anything to do with it. She really didn't know what was going on." And that was the- the you know, and that was where things started- I want to say things started going downhill cause that's when I started transitioning.

Niculescu: And that's when you really started to do a lot in the club scene you mentioned?

Lopez: Yeah, I started to do a lot in the club scene. Then I turned to survival work because you know I had a room. I had to like to maintain and I went to public assistance. They wasn't paying enough. I had to make ends meet. I had to eat. On top of that I had to get my hormones. That's where I started doing the club scene more but that's where I started like getting high more. And then because like I said all the depression started coming on top of me and seeing myself battling losing my apartment, even though it was a room. It was just like- and then I ended up going to a shelter system. I had to marry my friend so that we can be put in a family shelter so I won't be- because I heard horror stories like being put in a shelter in a room with like- and back then it was different it wasn't like if you identify as a woman you go into a woman's shelter. If your name didn't match your identity and it didn't matter, you would still be sent, if they knew you was born male, they would still put you into the males facility back then, my friend was like "Oh we can get married" because he was having trouble in his house. We ended up getting a domestic

partnership and we ended up leaving to the shelter. I spent like a good 3 years in the shelter. But it wasn't so bad, to be honest, living in the shelter, because I had my own room. And I was in a good section. First, they had me on 23rd street and 8th avenue and then they transferred me to 45th street and 8th avenue which was like it was a hotel called.... I don't know what it's called. It was actually convenient for me because I would walk to Escuelita too. [laughs] Or I would walk down to the west village and hang out at the bars. Yeah...

Niculescu: And even in that moment you were still able to like to engage in the club scene and...

Lopez: Yeah and I think that is where I was able to engage more because being in that area and starting to perform and stuff like that. I was able to just- and I wasn't working. My nights consists of hanging out and you know and going to the club. And it made it easy for me to perform. Now, as you get older- like back then I would go clubbing all night and get up the next day like nothing. Now [laughter] if I go to the club at night and I have to get up the next day to go to work, I have to call out of work because I would be wounded, and I can't find myself. I'm like no I can't do that anymore. Which is, and honestly as they say as you get older things that back then seem like needy. I thought I had to be in the club all the time. You know, because I love the attention. Even though a lot of the times it was negative attention, but I liked the attention, you know and I was known, I'm well known. That exposure got to me a little; of being able to go into the club for free, not making lines, or was like oh let me get- you know I'll get train tickets, whatever I wanted. But it was easy for me, then.

Niculescu: And were you still on hormones while you were in the shelter?

Lopez: Yeah, I was on hormones. I was on hormones already. Cause I started, I started right after I got laid off from the Department of Education. I started transitioning. Well I was doing a lot of drag until I met this trans woman who lived two blocks away from me and I didn't even know that they were trans. And she, she as a matter of fact my ex, my boyfriend at the time actually was cheating on me with her. And she came over to hang out one day and not me knowing she was like "Why you don't transition?" and stuff like that. We started transition—and you know, we like became good friends, but I just I didn't know what was going on till after a while. Yeah.... those years I do not want to talk about. [laughter] Those were my I lived in abandoned house/drug years don't talk about nothing.

Niculescu: I'm wondering like when you found out about the fact that your friend was who your boyfriend was cheating on you with. If how that --well just in general how that friendship was and how it was affected?

Lopez: I mean of course it kind of like messed up the relationship. Even though it wasn't a platonic friendship. It wasn't a friendship where were concrete. It was just you know; I met you, we became good friends because you showed me how to dress more feminine, you showed me how to go, you took me to the clinic to get my hormones. And that's where I come from, I don't trust nobody anymore. It's so hard cause I feel like you wear your heart on your sleeve, people that wear their heart on their sleeve are the ones to usually mostly always get those types of friends

that end up either backstabbing you or using you. That's why I've been very like, I've eliminated a lot of friends and I think I did good in doing that because now I look at them and they're not the same. They look totally different and like they've let the drugs take over. You know, they're not on hormones like they're supposed to. It's like okay, I kind of, you know showing your true colors did me a favor because look at where I am at now. You know. And I don't knock no one, I don't criticize no one. I give everyone the benefit of the doubt and I give everyone my blessings because you know some people take whatever they been, their life experience and turn it into something positive and you know some people just want to maintain that role. You know I wasn't happy doing survival work at all. Some trans women do love it they're like you know "I love doing survival work," and that's fine for them. I never was happy with that I never liked the way I felt during, and after when I was with a guy that was pain you know I never felt comfortable. And I used to as a matter a fact I used to find you know I'm not going to lie there were days when I was like "Yes okay I made me a good 300 dollars now in less than an hour". Of course, because you know I needed it, but the feeling that I used to get sometimes wasn't the feeling that I wasn't too happy. I was like "nah this cannot be life"[laughter] and it was also because I was hanging out with people that were trans, that had already started transitioning and had always told me oh if you wanna be a trans woman and you wanna go get your surgeries you have to prostitute. You know and back then Medicaid wasn't advanced none of the insurance were really paying for surgeries so you had to a lot of girls were going outside of town like out of the country to get their implants or some were injecting themselves loose silicone because the insurance company wasn't paying for that back then you know that and then losing my job and then it was just like everything was just like and I was just like don't know how I am alive sometimes. I am alive by the grace of god I have a purpose here [laughter]

Niculescu: And when did you feel like you mentioned, you mentioned you feel like your life is totally different now when you were reflecting on the club days and that whole experience?

Lopez: I want to say my life for the past 7 years had been different. I feel like I am always continuing to progress and it's just because I want better and I want to break the barrier that a lot of trans communities face. I can say I'm blessed. You know I'm employed and I'm doing the work that I thought didn't exist. My favorite line is I'm doing the job that I always dreamt about but didn't know it existed. And my best friend always tells me like that job was made for you and like that was for you. And he's right that job was, I felt was made for me; where I work at right now.

Niculescu: And what are you working as? What does the job entail?

Lopez: Well you know I work for the city. I work for the commission on human rights I am basically the transgender community liaison. Basically, everything that is trans related that falls under the 21 protected categories; whether it would be like discrimination, any form of discrimination, immigration status, anything that is trans related I am the go-to person.

Niculescu: How did you go about getting that?

Lopez: You know it's so funny someone sent me that job because I worked for 7 years at this place called AVP [NYC Anti-Violence Project] anti violence project. I was there for 7 years. Someone sent me the email and I didn't really pay attention to it. I had it in my email inbox for like 2 months. And then something was like you know what, just apply for it you just never know and I just felt also that I didn't want to apply for it because you know we get into this comfort zone and we don't want to change and were like "I'm a trans woman I should be happy that I got this job" and we settle. And I feel like because we settle it is because we don't challenge ourselves to see what's out there and I was like you know what, the hell with it, I'm going to apply for this if they give it to me they do if they don't they don't I still have a job. But it so happened that I got offered the position 3 months ago [laughter], 4 months ago.

Niculescu: Hmm and then can we maybe backtrack a bit, how did you get started at the anti-violence project?

Lopez: The funny thing is that I always say that, Cat, which back then was the director of client services. I was working at Bronx Community Pride Center and I was there for 7 years also. But they closed down now. They had a link, they wanted to do a linkage with Bronx Community Pride Center because at the time there was a lot of- I don't know if you heard of the violence that was going on with like the Lion King, they killed someone or something like that in the Bronx and it was because the person was dating a Lion King. They partnered up with organizations in the Bronx and Bronx Community Pride Center was one of them. I was sitting in a meeting and it was; Cat, one of her coworkers, and the sort of director at the time. And we all had a meeting, the director walked out Cat was explaining about the job description and everything and I said sounds like a job I should go for [laughter] and Cat was like "well you know we would love to, but you know we don't want to step any toes or step any boundaries" and I was like oh you're not what's your business card. And I got the business card and I emailed my resume and stuff like that and I went for the interview. And we always say the joke Cat was like my mom boss at work at AVP. We have the joke that she stole me from BCPC. And there I felt like, that job at AVP was the job that I needed to grow professionally and develop professionally. And because of the job that I did at AVP was the reason I landed this job and because I am known in the community. And the reason I am known in the community was through my shows, through pageants because I've done pageants before I won like two titles. Because of that I guess people know who I am.

Niculescu: And when did you start using the kind of like, I guess you could say the fame you had in the community from the pageants and the clubs towards community organizing?

Lopez: Yeah right because when I started doing the whole club scene I just noticed how our trans community and out LGBTQI youth were like- I was just like there has to be a change, there has to be a voice, and there can't be you know I don't want the person that's young that's going to transition think that the only thing you can do is sex work to transition. I just felt like there was a need in the community to have someone. And I don't wanna say that I'm the voice of the community because there are a lot of other trans women and other trans men that are doing the same work that I am doing. The only difference now is that I work in government. But there are a lot of trans women and men that are doing the work and they are great advocates and they are

great leaders. But I just felt like back then I needed to change; one I was like I don't want to continue doing survival work, two I wanted to change someone's life. I didn't want them to go through what I went through growing up and transitioning. I feel like I needed to, that's why I went like a counselor advocate and started going through that road.

Niculescu: And what were some of the steps you took to get out of the situation you were in and do some organizing?

Lopez: I always say you never know what destiny has in store for you and I always believe you meet someone for a reason. Back then I hung out with people from the club scene that all they wanted to do was go clubbing, all they wanted to do was get high, all they wanted to do was sleep all day, all they wanted... You know but I remember performing I met Dominique [Jackson] who's also my sister and who is also in Pose she plays electro [inaudible] she actually, me and her we had our sisterhood for 20+ years and you know she worked at Bronx Community Pride Center. and she was running the trans group used to and she would always be like come to the trans group come to the trans group and I came to the trans group and I was like oh I would love to do something like this you know. And then when they would do events and they needed a performer she would bring me. She always brought me to all the shows she was booked she would always say "I got my sister with me". You know she got me a lot of bookings. And I was working at this place called Alive and I was still in between on drugs, but it was a harm reduction place, but there was someone there who was trans who wanted my position and started filling my supervisor, at the times, head with stuff saying that I'm going to work high that they know I get high, and it was just a lot of things. It so happened that right when I lost my job, I was getting an apartment from the shelter, the shelter had put me an apartment. I was desperate. And Dominique [Jackson] introduced me to the executive director BCB at the time and I explained to her my situation and she gave me a position. Then there, first I was a hotline volunteer, I was working on a stipend, then she- they were looking for someone who was community liaison and she hired me on the spot for that because she liked the way that I spoke on the phone, I always spoke very professional on the phone. I've always been organized. She liked that and she hired me and that's where like, but at BCPC I didn't learn too much and I was a counselor and I was doing HIV counseling plus I took a lot of courses to be a tester and stuff like that. But I didn't learn much because there were certain people that worked at BCPC, everything was good up until like Dominique [Jackson] left. And our father at the time, Larry, may he rest in peace, he left. It was just like at war all the time with everyone else. Because they always thought that I was the executive director's pet. And I'm like I'm not her pet she tells me go to the bank, I'm going to go to the bank, if she tells me to go yeah, I'm going to go she's my boss! You know but there was always like a constant battle when I went in there, I didn't really grow professionally. And then it was until I got to AVP that's when it started. At BCPC is where I started with my counseling and doing advocacy work and learning about trans groups, running the trans group. They had youth drop ins. I know there's a couple of documentaries on me. There's one based when I was working at Bronx Community Pride Center. So yeah...

Niculescu: And how did it feel to start doing that work and really be like engaging?

Lopez: It felt good because I started hearing positive things from people like “oh my god thank you so much.” And also, because I did shows kind of helped because people felt like “oh, she’s like famous.” No, I’m not famous [laughter] but you know it’s like “oh my god she works at BCPC” and you know I was always at the club performing and like now I think my fame has developed drastically. Even though it’s like- no I’m just the average girl, trying to make a difference in the community and I’ve always been a firm believer of I’ll treat you like I want you to treat me. You know I’ve always treated everyone with respect. I’ve always been that person that, if you need to cry I’m here you could cry, if you need a ride you can call me [sirens] plus you know my house back then was very much like a shelter. People would always come and crash at my house and I would let them “I’m like yeah you could stay its fine.” [sirens] But I started brushing up on my counseling too and advocating while I was at BCPC. But growing professionally, becoming an advocate and a counselor and learning techniques was when I was working at AVP. And then you know, a lot of helping the trans community also was a way that like that kind of started like, cause I remember running a trans group one day and one of the girls, and I was telling them about my life and stuff like that, and one of the girls looked at me and was like I wish my life was easy, you have a job you can’t possibly know what I go through with I have to sell myself. When I broke it down to them, my past, they said “Wait a second, so she is just like us”. I used that as a way of becoming a positive role model in the trans community and letting them know like you can do what you want you just can’t let these obstacles overcome, you know take over you. So yeah. The counseling and the counseling to be honest those 7 years was draining; you know listening to people’s stories is very emotional draining. And I was already getting over the whole, like I love to advocate, I love to be an activist, I love you know speaking, but doing the counseling was really taking a toll on me emotionally it got to a point where I was like I didn’t want to do this anymore and I landed this job. [laughter]

Niculescu: [Laughter] And what was that point where you were like I don’t want to do this anymore, and you felt like you needed to change?

Lopez: Just because a lot of stories related to what I was going through, what I’ve been through in my past. Whether it be; an abusive partner, whether it was sexually assaulted, you know I also was sexually assaulted when I was young, and it went on for several years by a family member that I’m not gonna say. All of that just started triggering me a lot and I was like I don’t want to keep doing the counseling, I love listening to people and helping them out but there has to be another way that I can advocate for them other than doing the counseling. It was, its emotionally draining but I practiced a lot of self-care through AVP. That’s how it was, but it was already, I wanna say I would’ve made 7 years in July working for AVP. I wanna say like on my fifth year going into my fifth year working there is when I was already like really over the whole counseling thing I was like [gasps] “I don’t wanna do this anymore, this is triggering” this is a lot of stories starting to relate to a lot of stuff that I went through. I was like no there has to be something else out there.

Niculescu: And like in this kind of like these years where you’re starting to do organizing work. How does your life outside of work look like, and what was your routine, and the people that you’re around?

Lopez: My routine, I still enjoy my life. I still enjoy life as much as I can. I'll go out. Ironically enough I get invited to all these events. And I get invited to all these things going on and I go out and practice self-care. I'll go to a bar and I have a couple of drinks. I hang out with people that I know value me and cherish me. And that's important cause I've created a support system with these four people that I can really say I trust. And I guess also being now in this work that I do. Like I get invited to all these events constantly. And it's funny because like, not funny but it's weird because a lot of people that you've met in the past like you've crossed paths with, like I see them now but on a whole 'nother level. And I guess, I've always had a good reputation even though people have tried to taint my reputation. But I've always had a reputation where people always knew that if they came to me to talk to me about anything, you know I was the type of person that if I had two dollars in my pocket and you need those two dollars and I'm never going to see two dollars again I'll give those two dollars to you because you need it more than me. You know I'll survive, don't worry I won't eat I'll go to my grandmas and eat, or my mothers. You know what I'm saying that's how I've always been. You know till this day I have people inbox me and say I just want to say thank you because when I was at my lowest you gave me a place to say. You know I've done my couple of fuck ups too you know but I'm not perfect. Yeah.

Niculescu: And what's your relationship with your family been like through that whole process as well. You mentioned going to your mother's house to eat or your grandmother's house to eat or?

Lopez: Yeah, I mean my process with my family is, you know. My family is definitely now more accepting than ever. And like you know my mother has no problem. I call her like mom I'm hungry I'm coming over, she's like alright. Or you know my grandmother's house. My relationship with my family has gotten way better than it was, 10 years ago. [laughter] You know definitely, yeah; I don't have a problem. I go to my mother and be like-- I spent the night at my mother's yesterday, I was like "Mom I'm staying over," she was like "Ok, fine." [laughter]

Niculescu: [Laughter] What is your work now that you kind of gone into a government space, how has it changed, what are you up to?

Lopez: I mean now. Right now, because I'm only fresh only been for a couple of months. I entered at the most busiest time of the season which was Pride. My role right now has just been networking and creating a support system or creating a go-to. In a couple of years, I kind of want to run for office now. [laughter] That's where my goal is at now. That's where my mentality's at. Like maybe come city council or stuff like that and I think I could do it. My working for government has changed like drastically. I feel like I get more respect now. Because I have a big following on social media too. Like every time I post something it's like "oh my god I saw." And of course, like being the only trans woman of color openly, an open trans woman of color and working for government, the only one, that's like a big deal. That has helped me grow more and the fact that my boss loves me, [laughing] unconditional. She loves me, and I love her she is such a badass I always tell her she's such a badass woman and she's so empowering. And she wants to take me to the next level. You know she's a big supporter of the trans community. Yeah, she's a real big

supporter. She knew about me before I started working here [laughter]. Yeah, she was like “Where’s Chanel? When is she starting?” [laughter]

Niculescu: Yeah it feels like we got the gloss of the whole process. But is there anything that you want to go more in depth about or anything you want to talk about a bit more or anything we maybe missed?

Lopez: I don’t know [laughter] I feel like I’ve said enough. [laughter] Right? I don’t know. I don’t think there’s. I mean my next step, my net goal is you know, get my own apartment, move out of my room, get my own apartment. Hopefully meet someone in office [laughter] and run for office [laughter] Yeah, I just want to say I am grateful where my life is at right now, then where it was at several years ago. I can only continue to strive for this. Eventually I actually do want to be a, I say I want to be a public figure but in mainstream. Not just in the trans or gay scene, I want to be like well-known throughout mainstream. In the cis world, in the trans world, I want to be a household name [laughter].

Niculescu: Then I’m wondering maybe just how you just feel about that as a process now that you mentioned that Dominique [Jackson] is your sister. She’s getting there now with Pose.

Chanel Lopez: I know and everybody always asks me when I am going to be on the show and I’m like I don’t know. [laughter]. But yeah, I’m so proud of her because I remember 15 years ago we used to sit down and talk like what we wanted to do in life and you know how she wanted to model, and be famous in modeling, in social media, and in mainstream. And I always said, “I want to make a difference in the world” and I want to be like this person that everybody knows. You know, honestly I want to be a public figure and like 15 years later, like here we are. She’s doing a show and I’m working for government. I would love to be more on the media side of things, but that will come, everything through time. But it’s great, I’m proud of her.

Niculescu: Yeah that’s amazing.

Lopez: We rarely hardly speak anymore, but you know I understand she’s always busy. But she does text me from time to time when I was like “Sis!” And she was like “I love you sis I’m sorry we haven’t gotten in touch, we’ll get together soon” and I was like okay. She’s always on the go and she’s always making all these appearances and going places. She invited me to the premier, the private premiere that they had. It was beautiful; all the cast members were there, it was open bar, it was buffet tables all over, it was really nice.

Niculescu: That’s great. Anything else?

Lopez: No. Pay attention to your TV. I might be popping up there one day, not through Pose but maybe through something else. I always say I wanted to create a reality show, but for trans woman. Not for trans women the way they are constantly being portrayed on TV. But trans women working. Like the life of a trans woman in office, or the life of a trans woman with a regular 9-5. I’ve always been wanting to create a reality show like that.

Niculescu: Like shifting the narrative. Better keep our eyes out for that too. [laughter]

Lopez: Yeah you never know. Maybe someone wants to cast someone like me to a reality show. I'm willing to be followed in my day-to day life. That's basically what I am looking at right now. [laughter]

Niculescu: Great, well thank you so much.

Lopez: No thank you. This was really interesting.

Niculescu: Well thank you for sharing your story and I definitely hope it helps someone out there.

Lopez: Yeah and it's funny because you do these types of interviews, someone did a podcast on me and I was like okay a podcast... And someone hit me up on Facebook and was like "Oh my god." And I'm like what? "So I was taking a shower and I put on my podcast and here comes this voice I know." And they was like "I heard your whole story." I was like "Oh get out of here" [laughter]. I also had a documentary where they followed me on Viceland. It was called, the program was called Balls Deep. They followed me for like a whole summer two summers ago. Hopefully let's see if someone picks that up and be like I want to follow her [laughter] and make it a reality show.

Niculescu: Yeah and hopefully were just adding to the public archives of you. [Laughter]

Lopez: [Laughter] Right. Cause that what it seems like right, like this will be out there. Yeah who knows.

Niculescu: Cool, great. Well thank you.

Lopez: Thank you.