

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

RAFFI MARHABA

Interviewer: Carrie Hawks

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Transcribed by Damien Anderson

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Carrie Hawks: Hello my name is Carrie and I will be having this conversation with Raffi for the New York Trans Oral History project in collaboration with the New York City Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is February 26, 2019 and is being recorded in Brooklyn. Hi!

Raffi Marhaba: Hi.

Hawks: Ah, what's your name?

Marhaba: Raffi.

Hawks: What's your age and your pronouns?

Marhaba: I'm 34 and and I use they/them pronouns.

Hawks: Um, how long have you been in New York?

Marhaba: A little over fifteen years?

Hawks: What brought you here?

Marhaba: Um, well, I was born and raised in Brazil and I wanted to get out of the country, you know, that's the nice version, but I guess the real version is I got here through political asylum based on violence for sexual orientation...that was experienced in Brazil.

Hawks: Did you know- like, was it hard to get here?

Marhaba: Extremely hard. [inaudible] I mean I'm still in the process, it's not over yet. so I have been trying to get citizenship for actually more than fifteen years because I applied for it before I was actually here. So, it'd be what, seventeen years? And I still have at least three more years so, you know, maybe twenty years, I will get it.

Hawks: And then, is it expensive?

Marhaba: Oh yeah, you know, immigration is a business in this country and pretty much in a lot of countries so, it costs you money to get your finger printed, it costs money to get your work permit. If you lose your work permit they don't send you a replacement card you have to pay for a whole new one, not to mention you know, lawyer fees, and just filing fees. Ends up being I have an estimate that I have spent so far about \$20,000 on everything and it's still not over.

Hawks: That's crazy.

Marhaba: It's a lot of money. And you know while I'm paying taxes—and I have been paying taxes since I immigrated here—so there's also that portion. Of collecting money of immigrants through taxes and not giving us the benefits.

Hawks: Like unemployment or—

Marhaba: Yes, no—no unemployment

Hawks: No unemployment, no social security no, yeah.

Marhaba: Yeah. So, business.

Hawks: Jacked up system. Um, would you describe your gender?

Marhaba: Yes. Um, trans nonbinary.

Hawks: How do you...are there certain things in your appearance that make you feel more at home in your identity.

Marhaba: Hm, yeah, okay if I were to be more specific [inaudible] trans masculine nonbinary, so if you wanna be a little more specific. Well now I have sort of a beard...[laughter] Kind of, it's getting there. So that makes me feel really good, and I've—my face has changed a lot since I started Testosterone which is going to be two years...soon. Um, my body composition has changed a lot. I've gotten, thicker, more muscular. I really like that. And my voice, my goodness, oh my god, my voice, got so happy when it started dropping so—I think probably that was first immediate change that just made me feel so much more in my skin. Yeah.

Hawks: Well, that was going to be my other question. Has your presentation and comfort level with yourself changed in the last couple years?

Marhaba: Yes, it definitely has changed. Um well, before I started officially transitioning I think I was already making some of those changes, with my hair and clothing and yeah. So I think, you know it wasn't like a sudden change, it took some time to change. But yeah, my hair has changed. I guess clothing choices have somewhat changed too.

Hawks: Changed how? Like it got shorter, different color, longer?

Marhaba: [laughter]

Hawks: It's an audio interview. [laughter]

Marhaba: Yeah it's um, I hate to fall into the binary terms but I'm definitely more on the masculine side of clothing choices. Now I still wear a lot of—I don't have a lot—I've never had like a lot of colorful clothing, I only have like a few of those but I still wear them which is great.

Uh, I like vibrant colors. It's not like my palette of colors have changed it's just the type of clothing that I choose now to be more masculine. But you know um, now recently I've been getting into some make up which is cool. Some eyeliner [laughter] so that also has changed because I never wore a lot of makeup when I presented differently anyways, and now I'm actually like, enjoying it so it's pretty cool.

Hawks: Do you feel like there's less of a pressure now or do you feel more freedom now that allows you to do that?

Marhaba: I feel like I'm just more of myself now and before I was perhaps doing it because of social pressure of what a...female presenting person is supposed to look like and definitely some pressure from family I would say. My mother in particular too. She'd just be like "you know you'd look so much prettier if you had makeup on." And kind of like passive aggressive things like that. And now I just get to do it for myself! Which is great.

Hawks: Your comfort level in a queer space verses a trans only space or like a space with like lots of cis people like—

Marhaba: Oh. Yeah. That's rough. Even within the queer community yeah, okay. If we're talking about like queer, cis environments... is that the question?

Hawks: Yeah.

Marhaba: Mhm. Um, well I've experienced a lot of transphobia within the queer community and I actually used to be pretty ignorant about the whole thing myself when I just identified as, well, first lesbian and then queer. So I tend to feel very less—much more—much less comfortable within queer cis spaces just because of the amount of ignorant things that I have heard from queer cis people. And trans folks views usually are just left in the back anyways. Even today I was talking to this queer person and they said "what are your preferred pronouns?" You know, very well intended [laughter] and I was like "well, you know it's kind of like you don't ask someone what is your preferred name it's just your name it's who you are it's not what you 'prefer' to be or who you 'prefer' to be." So you know it's going to take some time so I don't feel particularly safe I would say, in a way? And even within trans spaces, especially the trans binary folks also there is some gap that happens I think the folks that are nonbinary tend to have the grayest of the areas and be more misunderstood and are more subject to all sorts of microaggressions and violence because we're just so in-between. That for a lot of people it's much easier to be like "oh I understand why you transitioned from" quote unquote "'male to female' that makes sense to me but like this nonbinary thing? I have no idea." You know so, even within those spaces it's complicated to navigate a lot of times.

Hawks: What does being nonbinary mean to you?

Marhaba: It means being in-between. That's...what I really like even though, or in addition to, presenting more masculine, because that's how I feel comfortable in myself. I still don't identify

as a guy, or a man especially, that word is pretty loaded to me. Man. You know. I tend to like... I get—it feels a little endearing when I hear 'dude' you know or [laughter] sometimes if I'm 'bro' but not like the "bro" bros! [laughter]

Hawks: [laughter] Not a bro.

Marhaba: Not a bro-bro! Just like a cute bro. [laughter] So, being in-between and not identifying with the binaries is, what I feel...comfortable in myself.

Hawks: And so you talked a little about being in trans meetings but a lot of those spaces can be white. Can you tell me about your experiences with the trans community or queer community?

Marhaba: It's very true that queer and trans spaces tend to be more dominated by white people but that's not a surprise because white people tend to have access and resources more easily than a lot of POC's do, and it's very hard for us in general to be able to foster and create our, I guess, own spaces for again, lack of accessibility, and just there's so much more trauma and violence that happens. But um, in New York I feel more lucky because there's more access to those spaces that are POC centered and queer centered, and then if you go a little more, trans centered. Or there will be events at least once a month where I can seek the trans POC folks of color and feel validated and seen. But yeah, they do tend to be more white and then I feel like I always have to pick which part is more palat—palleta—[stumbles over the word]

Hawks: Palatable.

Marhaba: Palatable to the environment so if I even attempt to explain or express ah, my Arabness than that becomes some sort of issue where it can be easily dismissed or disregarded. Or not taken into account. Or white folks will, um, talk over you and non-prioritize voices of color within that environment and that can feel very frustrating of course. And I mean if you also put immigration stuff—I have you know with more of my layers added to them which is 'immigrant' and that's even more complicated to hold conversations or find commonalities between all of those so but it's just the gap is so big.

Hawks: Yeah. I think you had mentioned actually once that—several months ago about that ah well, queer folks feel a lot of kind of ways about gay marriage but I think you brought up a point about gay marriage and immigration, uh, do you want to talk a little more about that?

Marhaba: Yeah. So you know I come from a social justice space, let's put it this way, like activism is a big part of my life, it's always been a big part of my life, and as someone who is pretty radical I can myself—being pretty radical, I don't completely disagree with the fact that, in this pursuit of rights for LGBTQ folks there was a particular emphasis on marriage and it got a lot of criticism from more radical folks as being "well aren't we just conforming to heteronormativity and this is genderism by focusing so much on marriage". And while I see the validity of that, as an immigrant that's pretty essential for my existence, to be able to be here and that's how I got my Green Card was because...then gay marriage—LGBTQ marriage—had been approved so I was able to marry

my partner at the time who was a citizen and then I could stay, and if that hadn't happened, I would have been deported because I did get a deportation letter. So if none of those efforts had been put, then a lot of immigrants—what opportunities would they have but to maybe, fake some marriage with some straight couple and that's ah—with some straight person—and that's pretty [inaudible], that's kind of like, not the purpose of community within our LGBTQ folks. Like we wanna give people the right to be themselves and then subjecting folks who want to immigrate here to have to pretend to, be straight? [laughter] that's kind of the opposite of what we're doing. So yeah, I think there's a huge gap that a lot of more radical queer folks miss in that sense, because they're not taking into account immigration voices—immigrant voices.

Hawks: Before you came to New York, were you aware much—or actually when was the first time you were aware of like, trans folks and trans community.

Marhaba: Oh, that was a long time ago. Probably when I was a kid. Maybe around age five or so. My mother used to work at a place when you will call it a "bad" quote-quote neighborhood by white people which means there were a lot of folks of color and there was a lot of prostitution and some of the prostitutes were trans folks, and my mother and—it's so ironic, maybe we'll get into the family portion of it at some point, but the irony of this is that my mother befriended or—the trans folks befriended my mother because they thought I was the cutest kid in the world! [laughter] So they actually would walk me and my mother from her work to the parking lot, both of them, and they were like pretty tall and intimidating, just to make sure we had some sort of like protection I guess to get from where we needed to go to. So that was my first contact I would say with trans folks which was "wow, they're really tall and really cool! [laughter] And they want to protect me! That's great."

Hawks: Wow, that's interesting that they're protecting...yeah, yeah look at that

Marhaba: [laughter] Yeah.

Hawks: Uh, you were going to tell us about your—your childhood.

Marhaba: Yes.

Hawks: Well, I mean, I guess—

Marhaba: —My family growing up?

Hawks: Yes, what was your family life like growing up?

Marhaba: Light topic [laughter] Um, well my mother was a single mother, she got divorced when I was one, I've never met my biological father, except at his funeral when I was...mm, eighteen, nineteen maybe? I don't really recall it, maybe eighteen. My mother got involved with someone else when I was six, from six to thirteen. And he was an alcoholic, and used to beat her up,

physically, yes. And I grew up with a lot of domestic violence, and seeing a lot of substance use, in this case alcohol...primarily. So it wasn't a very safe or stable home or family structure.

Hawks: Yeah.

Marhaba: Yeah.

Hawks: And what's your relationship like now with your family of origin?

Marhaba: Pretty inexistent I would say. I haven't talked to my mother in almost two years. I completely cut her off my life when I came out to her as trans. And it was pretty ugly. Well before then we've always had a very complicated relationship because of the...past, which rippled into the present and future quite a bit. After that she also got involved with another alcoholic who then...sexually assaulted me, so there was also that part. I still talk to my grandma who I love dearly. And she's here in the U.S. also in New York, so her and I have a good relationship, and she's the only family I have.

Hawks: How did your grandmother um...respond to your transition?

Marhaba: It was great actually. [laughter] So when I first came out to her I was thirteen, she completely accepted me she just said she wanted me to be happy and loved me and then when I came out to her as trans at thirty-three? [laughter] She was like "oh so that means you're gonna have a beard now?" And I was like [laughter] 'hopefully!' [laughter] and she was just like "okay, can't wait to see it!" You know, she was, she told me she really loved me and I didn't see her for a while um, before—I mean, when I first came out to her and then I didn't see her for a while and I started T so obviously I had a lot of changes once I saw her again and the first thing she told me when she saw me in person was "you look so happy." So that really meant a lot to me.

Hawks: So you speak a lot of languages—

Marhaba: [laughter] Yes.

Hawks: So how was it navigating gender in other languages or with your grandmother.

Marhaba: Yeah! That's a great question. Thanks for asking that, because people don't think about this enough. Yeah I speak quite a bit of languages, my mother taught me Portuguese because I was born and raised in Brazil. Well, explaining the whole nonbinary thing for my grandmother was quite challenging and it was challenging for me personally to wrap my head around what—I—I took a while to go for the they-them because it didn't feel natural to me. Let's put it that way. And I think it is because in Portuguese you don't have a neutral term, everything is gendered. Like Spanish for example, everything is gendered. So the concept of "neutrality", quote-unquote or having like...a gender neutral or in-between is just not—it's so interesting because if you don't have the language it's almost like you can't—you don't really feel it, you don't relate to it. So it was very complicated for me to get my head into that space, and I slowly kinda forced myself into

the they-them. It felt very clinical to me, felt very cold. But once—I think the more I dove into it the more it made sense. Because then I was just like "well you know I'm thinking in English I'm navigating in English" so I kinda have to compartmentalize my brain a little bit, and I guess my identity in a way a little bit, to be able to fully go into it. Um, but it's very complicated talking to my grandmother about it. She uses he/him for me which is really cute and validating in a lot—in a different way. Because she was just like "well I'm just going to call you son" and I was like "aw that's really cute. Okay, I'll take it" but if it had been any other person I would be like "No, absolutely not" you know but it's very sweet coming from her. So I feel like it can be quite challenging to think in nonbinary ways for people who don't have access to that language. And I always wonder how, we can make more space in the queer community particularly for non-English speakers to. To be able to feel more seen, and more validated, in a lot of ways because language is such a part of who we are, and it's culture and it's everywhere. So being able to give support to folks whose primary language or mother tongue is not English, would be really awesome.

Hawks: Yeah.

Marhaba: Yeah. [laughter]

Hawks: Let's see, speaking of support and misgendering, well—maybe I was just thinking of misgendering—how do you cope with being misgendered.

Marhaba: Hm. Different ways depending on who that's coming from I guess. So you know there are tiers...of [laughter] how you cope with being misgendered. I think now that I have a beard and that I am read most of the time as a cis guy, for the vast majority of society if I get "he'd" it's not a big shock to me, or I don't get pissed because I just don't have the energy to be like "oh actually it's they/them" because I don't really care. And in a lot of ways it's secretly, weirdly, dualistically validating? It's just very complex. Because masculinity is such a big portion of my identity but it's not all of my identity. I still feel validated even though I want to be like "No. It's not that!" [laughter] But when people call me "man" I—I—get, I can't—I get very upset and I want to be like "No. I like don't like this word at all." If it's friends who have met me pre-transition and they misgender me with the gender that I presented before my transition. I get very very upset. It has happened a few times. It's just—I'm like—it's just—you know—just validate me! I know it's complicated but it's just very very hurtful and I, the best way that I can cope with it, when it comes from that someone I love, like a friend for instance? I would just try to talk to them as compassionately as possible because it helps me to be kind to myself also, by being kind with them—so I can be kind to myself as well. But there are people who I don't tolerate that from, like for example my mother, it just became so much that I was like "I can't. I absolutely can not." because, interestingly enough I read an article that came out recently where they did this research: that 4 out of 5 people intentionally misgender a trans person and I absolutely believe that. So [laughter] yes, I absolutely believe it because like I saw the whole thing with my mother and just a few folks that were close but not really close and I always wondered "are you just doing this intentionally? To like, destabilize me?" I just, and like that research was like "most likely, yes they are."

Hawks: People are, unbelievable.

Marhaba: Yes, yes people are unbelievable. You know, I hit the gym too. That keeps me very um...in touch with myself and then I can let it out on the weights, and, art is a big form of expression for me so, and talking to other trans folks about it, it's probably the best coping mechanism. Because then we can just validate each other, and rant about misgendering with each other. So I would—that's my favorite probably.

Hawks: Do you have experiences with mental illness, or coping with a lot of stresses.

Marhaba: [soft laughter]

Hawks: Do you—do you wanna talk about how you, cope with like, stresses and things that are impacting your mental health?

Marhaba: Mm, hm. is this—are you talking mental health particularly to the fact—particularly tied to my trans identity, or what?

Hawks: Well, there's you as a person and that encapsulates you as a trans person so.

Marhaba: Yes, absolutely.

Hawks: I think queer communities have often had higher rates of like mental health, issues—

Marhaba: No freaking kidding. Yes, I mean how could we not? We oftentimes, our families just turn their back on us, and that has created me definitely a lot of mental health issues, specifically tied to that portion of rejection tied to my gender, or my sexual orientation. Um, therapy. Has saved my life many, many times. And I really believe in it because it works for me, and...it's something that I really like to...recommend to other queer folks if they can have access to it because talking to a professional about all this trauma that we carry as queer and trans people—and beyond their queerness as people of color, as I don't know, all our multiple identities that we have. It's key to my well being, to my mental health. I need to be able to talk through the feelings, I need to be able to navigate those emotions. And a lot of those emotions have evolved really hardcore things, like self-harm and suicide and eating disorders. And tons of insomnia! That's oh my god, that's a lot of insomnia, absolutely. So it's no wonder that we do have extra mental health issues because getting turned away by your family is generally—is not that great at all, and that tends to happen a lot. Community healing, is also a great way to cope with that. Being surrounded by other queer folks that have experienced similar situations as you have, or are feeling not that great about their mental health and they're trying to break the stigma of mental health and what does depression look like, or just validating each other for getting out of bed, when it seems like such a—easy task. You know to be able to be with people who would understand that and not be judgmental is also a great form to cope with mental health issues. I think community healing is really powerful. And there's—there's a twist to that, right, there's a

catch-22 to that too, that I do feel like as queer community we tend to embody our trauma so much, that it also sometimes—being in those spaces can feel a little bit like a [laughter] toxic relationship in a lot of ways because it just becomes so much trauma, and it's all about trauma, and this is just so much that I do have sometimes to just like, step away from it a little bit. So there's also that kind of like, relationship, or bonding through trauma. Which is beautiful but also can...not be what you need, sometimes. Sometimes you need to bond with people, not because of trauma necessarily. And I feel like there is a lot of bonding through trauma within the queer community. And I'm talking not just romantic relationships I'm talking about friendships or any type of relationship really. So I have to watch for that too. Did that make sense?

Hawks: I think so—like so if you say like bonding through trauma; if you realize you're communicating with someone who's been through some similar experiences and then you form a strong emotional connection because you've both been through...

Marhaba: Through this trauma

Hawks: Yeah.

Marhaba: And I'm not saying that's not a good thing. That can be a good thing if you know how to navigate that relationship in a way that—it's just I've had—this is kind of a weird example but you know when you're depressed and then you bond with other people that are depressed and then you talk about that depression. Sometimes you need to bond with people that are not in that mind state as well to be able to cope through your things. And I do feel like as queer people we do tend to feel immediate attraction or we're like "oh you understand how I feel, oh you're that" but the other person may not be in the position to actually like, help you mentally? So there is some—I—It's just is my personal experience I had to kind of watch for myself that I'm not getting too involved or dependable or any of that with folks who are also in need just like I am in need. It's good to go talk it out, but sometimes you have to have some boundaries on that.

Hawks: Yeah—because it can kind of compound both your suffering with their suffering—

Marhaba: —Yes! Exactly, it's a big mess.

Hawks: it's just a big, like big, [inaudible] ball. Um, Have you—like before you had community to cope with, did you cope in other ways like—Well I guess you touched on a little bit of behaviors you used to engage in, like self-medicating.

Marhaba: Yeah, well yes.

Hawks: Or art, really—because not everyone has community around them and physical space, so were there ways that you were able to cope without having community around.

Marhaba: Cope in a positive way? Or just cope?

Hawks: Just cope.

Marhaba: [laughter] Yeah.

Hawks: [laughing simultaneously] It's not a BFA, it's [inaudible] an actual experience

Marhaba: [laughter] Yeah, I mean. Definitely healthy and unhealthy ways. Drugs were one of them. Yeah. I've never—I've never been like hooked on drugs. I don't have that kind of—I get a little scared I guess, with the tendency of being 'hooked' into substances personally because of my upbringing, growing up with someone who was. But I have had my share[/fair] amount of experimenting with them, and I have used them in ways that felt very specific to just, I didn't want to feel anything, or I just wanted to feel something different. And there's a danger to that even though I wasn't 'hooked' on anything per say—but there's still mentally felt like i was dependent on some substance to just be able to get through the day—sort of thing. Exercise was a big high for me. Still is in a way, but healthy now, before really wasn't. It was just a way to cause myself physical pain and then feel good, and then overexercise and...basically destroy my body in a way, because of overexercising. I also coped with some eating disorders. I briefly mentioned—I was anorexic for a long time, and also bulimic. Just, basically wanted to kill myself through that form of coping. It's kind of like, it's a very interesting...coping mechanism...because you're kind of disappearing in a way to be able to be seen. You know because it's like your body is consuming itself and you're getting smaller and smaller but really all you want is just to be seen. So it's kind of—kind of a mindfuck, because you're kind of shrinking into your own self but really I just wanted to be seen, you know, I like wanted to be bigger. I wanted people to see me but—

Hawks: What—When you say you wanted to be seen, what would that have looked like, to be seen?

Marhaba: To be accepted. To not have to cause myself pain to the point where my body was so freaking thin just to be able to get some attention to be like "hey, I'm here". I did some cutting too, when I was a teenager. Nowadays there are better ways for me such as art—I did art too, before, but now it's much more present in my life to be able to do that, express myself through poetry, music, visual art, dancing, is great.

Hawks:—Dancing's amazing.

Marhaba: —Very very good. Um, yeah. And just aromatherapy stuff. Spending time with my dog, and with my partner.

Hawks: Yeah, those are good—good ways to spend time. Um, let's see, I guess—uh, I don't know if I asked—when did you first start realizing that you might be trans, or like—what was that connection, was there like a spark?

Marhaba: Funny enough, for me it started by changing my sexual orientation, that was my first move into it I guess. I was, I don't know, 30—maybe not—29? Yeah because I was married then.

Yes—Yes. Well I was in a monogamous relationship for five years and then maybe at year 3, I was in therapy to deal with my mother, and that was just one day, it was—it's funny because you'd think it's like "oh I woke up and then it was this thing" but i'm sure it wasn't, it just felt like it was. [laughter] But I literally woke up and I remember going to therapy and I was like "Steve, I don't know what's going on, I just find, everybody attractive."

Hawks: [laughter]

Marhaba: Every single person! I was walking down the street and I was like "Wow! You're so attractive! Wow! You're so attractive! Wow! You're so hot!" And you know like, everybody! And I mean everybody! Trans, nonbinary, like folks I hadn't necessarily thought I would be attracted to because I was pretty much only attracted to like female-presenting people. And I was like "I'm attracted to this guy, I don't know what's going on, I'm just—everybody's attractive to me." [laughter] I was like "I think I might be pansexual." [laughter]

Hawks: [laughter]

Marhaba: [laughter] That was a big gap for me! That was big! Because I yeah, I pretty much identified as a lesbian and occasional queer—I'd be attracted some times to some dudes, you know, but very rarely, wasn't really my thing. And I then was just like "I think I'm pansexual I don't know what's going on." Also like my sexual desires started to change. I was like—is this gonna be TMI?

Hawks: Oh. I...don't know. I mean they didn't mention anything about... Yeah.

Marhaba: Yeah. I just, it just came into *FROOM *you know, it was like, "wow! Okay." Maybe there is—maybe there's something trying to tell me something about myself and yeah, the things I wanted sexually also started to change. I wanted to explore new things. And then I thought about it for a long time, and i started talking about it in therapy and it was a huge mindfuck because I was like "Fuck I think I'm trans and it's bad because it's trans-masc and I don't wanna be a guy! And I have so much issues with patriarchy and fuck toxic masculinity and now like, I want to be a guy? This is fucked! Like how can I reconcile all of that. So then I had to ask myself what masculinity—even was! What does that even mean? Is masculinity inherently toxic? Or you know—is there a difference between masculinity and toxic masculinity? So I did have to unpack even all those ideas that I had about masculinity that may not have been really what I believed in? And they were probably a lot of it due to trauma and I didn't want to investigate a lot of them because of trauma but then I was forced to because I was leaning on that—as part of my identity and it was a really mind-fuck to be able to reconcile all of those things in my head. And then once I also understood the nonbinary portion...That was also very complicated! [laughter] But it made it easier in a way I guess because I was like "oh wow, okay I don't have to" you know because when I first started thinking about it I was like "oh fuck, like I think I want to be a guy-guy."

Hawks: Like a man.

Marhaba: Like a maan! And I was like eughh. But I was like "there must be another way! Because that doesn't feel comfortable!" [laughter] "There must be something in between" and then yeah. Then it's like, "oh my god okay, yes, I feel good about this, yes I can ease into this much more- I feel it, it's speaking to me, it's speaking to me." It was a huge...identity crisis! Like—It was almost like "who the fuck was I? What was I doing?" And then I just started thinking "wow, did I suppress this, this whole time?"

Hawks: Like, since you were a kid? Or-

Marhaba: Since I was a kid? Was I coerced into just adopting [car horn starts going off] a different—[laughter] You know I started thinking "was I coerced into thinking that I was who I was because of societal pressure? Because of the way I was raised?" And then, if I had—even when I immigrated here, this is the funny thing, right. When I immigrated here through political asylum I had to "prove" to the government that I was a lesbian right? So I really, yeah they make you... Mm.

Hawks: Like pictures?

Marhaba: There were pictures—

Hawks: —Like—graphic pictures?

Marhaba: Well you have to be kissing other women, yeah. And the whole interview process they ask you a lot of straight-to-the-point, invasive sexual questions to make sure that you're what you're claiming what—that you're a lesbian, so like so, "describe to me your first girlfriend sexually, what happened when you first had sex."

Hawks: You had to tell them about having sex?

Marhaba: Yes. And she also asked me who was the man and who was the woman in the relationship.

Hawks: Oh my gahad! Do they understand—[laughter]—what a lesbian is?—ok.

Marhaba: Apparently not. But I got so hooked into like—or I got, I had this like "I have to be a good immigrant" sort of mentality that I do feel like I suppressed a lot of my sexuality and gender expression throughout the first...maybe eight years or so in immigration because it was so severe, it was like "I have to be this one version of myself" and I really leaned a lot on the fem side which was completely unusual for me because I- that interview like "who was the man, who was the woman" I was like "wow I can never have this happen again I really have to—I really want to be this lesbian who's the 'good lesbian' who's going to conform to the cis expectations and she's just going to have long hair and people would be like 'I can't even tell she's a lesbian!'" That kind of image so I could get through this ridiculous interview process, and immigration process, so I do feel like I suppressed a lot of who I was to fit into this immigration expectation for the first eight

years that I was here. But—you know I do wonder—all these things, is like was I always trans, or did I have the desire to explore that, and I just couldn't. At this point it really doesn't matter because here I am now and I am so happy that at 33 I decided to come out as trans. Yay!

Hawks: Yay! [simultaneous laughter] So you mentioned about being a good immigrant and a good lesbian in order to be a good immigrant so now that you've decided to embrace more of yourself do you have any fears about your immigration and your trans identity jeopardizing that?

Marhaba: Absolutely. I mean I've had a name change, I've had sex marker change, and any changes that you have in immigration including your address, can delay so much of your process. And I haven't been back in Brazil since I've been here—it's been a little bit over fifteen years because traveling is...I literally don't know what could happen. I don't know if when I come back I am gonna be able to enter the country again even though I have a green card. But the funny thing is my green card doesn't match my current name! And my passport has my dead name and the picture doesn't look anything like me! [laughter] So, traveling anywhere, is very complicated for me, especially internationally. Luckily nationally I only have to deal with the TSA machine being like "Who the hell is this person? What is in between their legs? I dunno! I can't compute! Alarm!" But at least my drivers license match my face, match my name, match how I present so I'm like "Okay' I can deal with this." But in terms of immigration now I'm just gonna—they're just gonna give an excuse to delay my process, one. And traveling internationally I already know I'm gonna be questioned. People are gonna think I stole someone's passport, I'm going to be put into a room—I already know because I've been there, I've been put into rooms and I've been questioned. When I had my quote unquote "advanced parole" to travel because that's what it's called.

Hawks: Like you're, in prison.

Marhaba: —Like I'm a criminal. Yeah. When I didn't have the green card I only had my work permit, they give you advanced parole so you can travel. That's what I had to have and I was questioned even though all my documents were fine. You know but, yeah, it's complicated, very complicated, so. I don't regret it and I think it's good that I'm doing this and that they have to deal with it and they have to be confused by it yeah. Let them be confused by it. [laughter]

Hawks: Complicate their minds.

Marhaba: Yes. [laughter]

Hawks: What do you love about being trans?

Marhaba: Hmm, wow. What do I love about being trans? Wow, so many things. I—it's me so I love myself because I'm trans. This is wonderful. I love that...I get to redefine masculinity in a way that's healthy and not toxic. And that I can inspire other trans folks and that I can call out on cis men about their bullshit and that they hopefully can learn, to be better men, by looking at all

these fabulous trans masc nonbinary people and be like: "Oh holy shit! Maybe I'm doing masculinity in a way that's not the greatest!" [laughter] Not that my job is to—

Hawks: —No—

Marhaba: —make cis men better because honestly I have so much better things to do than do that. But I feel like just by virtue— virtue of existing and holding conversations that happens automatically and of course I have to keep myself accountable as well because I get some sort of privileges now—I don't get catcalled anymore for example. Which is really great. Although, I was "puppied", sometimes I'm "puppied" ah which is fun [laughter]. But it's not the same thing obviously as being harassed as a femme-presenting person. So I do love that and I just love the energy of other trans people and being surrounded by them. And I think we...do defy a lot of expectations from society and our families and our friends, in a way that is very confusing for most people, still, and will probably continue to be for a while and I love that boldness—of existing in a trans body and mind and soul.

Hawks: It's also exciting now like being trans is not a new concept and I love like, that people are starting to learn more about trans history and being trans of different cultures.

Marhaba: Oh yeah. I mean here we are doing this interview right? How freaking cool is that? [laughter]

Hawks: Cool. Um, what do you want to be remembered for?

Marhaba: Just in general?

Hawks: Yeah. I mean you could narrow it down to one or two things but like what would you like to be remembered for? When people think of you what would they be like "oh yeah they were so... 'they did this'".

Marhaba: Oh. Raffi, the social justice activist who was so bold, and really fucked some shit up and made a lot of people uncomfortable [both laugh] but you know, they were so kind and loving and such a warm community member, and they did shit for the community and they changed their communities. That's all I want. I want to make an impact on my communities, I would love to be remembered for that.

Hawks: Is there anything else that you want people to know?

Marhaba: I love you, Carrie.

Hawks: Oh god. [laughter] Oh my gosh. Okay I'm so embarrassed. Yeah, that's wonderful.

Marhaba: [laughter]

Hawks: Uh-heh I love you too. Um. [laughter] Um, uh, okay now I'm thinking I'm on track, doot do doo. Um, anything you want to add... um, yes thank you very much! Um Is there—is there anyone else that you think should be interviewed? In this project? Are there—

Marhaba: Oh my god yes. Uh, I got the trans contacts to interview that are not American, which is, I'd love more of that. Yeah.

Hawks: That's great! Thank you very much for participating in this project. And embarrassing me.

Marhaba: [laughter]

Hawks: In a wonderful way. Um, Yeah. Okay. [laughter] Thanks to anyone listening. You made me blush. All right, cool.