

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

TEI OKAMOTO

Interviewer: Eman Abdelhadi

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Transcribed by Chelsea Cole

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Eman Abdelhadi: Hi my name is Eman Abdelhadi, and I'll be having a conversation with Tei Okamoto for the New York City's 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 experiences of trans identifying people. It is March 8th, 2019, and this is being recorded at New York University's Abu Dhabi branch on Saadiyast Island. So let's get started. Hi Tei!

Tei Okamoto: Hello.

Abdelhadi: Tei, tell us [clears throat] about your gender pronouns to start.

Okamoto: He, him.

Abdelhadi: He/him, thank you. And where were you born?

Okamoto: I was born in Los Angeles.

Abdelhadi: Cool! Have you-and how long? How long did you live there?

Okamoto: I lived there until I was 19. Maybe 20.

Abdelhadi: And then where did you go?

Okamoto: And then I moved to Japan, and then I returned and was a transfer student to Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Abdelhadi: Oh awesome, how long were you in Japan?

Okamoto: I was in Japan for about a year.

Abdelhadi: Nice and then, um. And then you went to college in Ohio?

Okamoto: I went to-yes, I finished my undergrad at Antioch college in Yellow Springs.

Abdelhadi: Cool, and then where did you go?

Okamoto: Then I moved to San Francisco and resided there until-until the great gentrification disaster took place. And um, I lived there, I would say the Bay area, until I did actually make the move to Oakland. Until 2009.

Abdelhadi: Then New York or?

Okamoto: Then I moved to New York, and I've been in New York with my partner for 10 years. Then I'll be moving back to Los Angeles shortly.

Abdelhadi: Cool, Cool. I want to get know about your experiences in all those places. But let's start with your childhood. Tell me a little about what that was like.

Okamoto: Well, I grew up in uh, an area in Los Angeles, which borders Gardena, California and Torrance, California, and for most people the best way to describe it is about 7 minutes by freeway to Compton.

Abdelhadi: [laughter]

Okamoto: Because people know notorious Compton, which I argue is a suburb, if it everywhere else around it is a suburb. So let's call it a question of what a suburb is...?!

Abdelhadi: Totally.

Okamoto: [laughter] Um, it was a predominately Japanese American community. Many, many folks after the war after, after the interment camp, resettled in areas like Gardena, North Torrance. They also settled in an area called Crenshaw, Baldwin Hills, Lumbar Park. These were small enclaves of JA's [Japanese American's], so we've always been in these spaces that were shared spaces with other people of color. So growing up, I really like- white folks were really marginal to my like everyday life. Like I definitely experienced the systems of-of whiteness but there, you know-that wasn't part of my day-today. I spoke like what's called Pidgin. In Hawaii, some people, academics will correct me and say its Hawaiian Creole. But we call it Pidgin. Working class people just call it Pidgin. So I always spoke a-a tongue that was English with a mixture of Hawaiian, with a mixture of Chinese, Japanese, probably Portuguese. Many, many different things.

Abdelhadi: And were your parent's immigrants themselves?

Okamoto: My father's mother was immigrated to the United States when she was 15. So he was really the 1st generation born in the United States. He was then interned in the Japanese American internment camp at the age of three.

Abdelhadi: Wow.

Okamoto: That deeply affected him and his family. My mother is from Hawaii and was born and raised there. Her parents were also born and raise there. But just to-I guess It's 2019, my grandfather just passed two months ago at 108. So he lived-I mean he was born in Hawaii in, you know, so count back those many years...

Abdelhadi: I'm sorry for your loss.

Okamoto: Yeah, it was pretty, it was a big one. So they grew- and then they came to the mainland, and so I grew up very much-right-you know, 15 minutes away where my grandparents, and so that-they essentially raised me. I was a latch-key kid. So my father you know, worked all day and

my mom also worked all day. So my grandmother in my young years would come and meet me either at the school and walk me home, or be there to after-after school but um, and then later I had my little key to get into the house. [laughter]

Abdelhadi: Sure, what did your parents do for a living?

Okamoto: My father was a mechanic. He initially worked for Ford Automotive and then um, had a pretty bad, and their notorious for racial misconduct. And so he left Ford and then went to Nissan, and retired from Nissan Motor Corporation, and then my mom was an elementary school teacher.

Abdelhadi: Great. Yeah.

Okamoto: I had one sibling who's older and yeah, so she's-I'm adopted, within the family, so my mother's sister is my birth mother. I grew in a mono-racial Japanese household, which I think is really important to say because there's not, there-there are more people that are trans that are racially adopted, where they're kids of color who end up in white homes. And that was not my case at all. I would say that it really, it really, marks me very differently in adoptee spaces. I have a really strong sense of self and self-identity. And um...

Abdelhadi: As a person of color or?

Okamoto: Yeah as a person of color. I think my grandmother really, um, she really prepared me for the kind of discrimination I was going to get from the Japanese community, which so she was insistent that I read, write and be able speak Japanese. And of my-all of my cousins and even my sister, I'm the only one that does that, and as the solo mixed-race child. [laughter]

Abdelhadi: [laughter] Funny how that works.

Okamoto: I mean she armed me correctly. I have spent most of my time in communities of color, and so...I think, I think the expectation or the default is that I might be this, you know, this American person. Who-you know? Has no relation to-you know, has no relation to Japanese or Japan, and I very much do, so...

Abdelhadi: So tell me about our earliest memories of either experiencing a trans community or coming with contact-coming into contact with your trans-ness or other people's?

Okamoto: Yeah, so um, so-so I think what can be referenced in terms of like what's on the books. It may not be a fully accurate story of our-our household, but there was a play that was written. It's called the *Sweetest Hangover*, and that is based on my-my house in San Francisco. So this was circa 1992 -93' and this was really a place it was-we were just this notorious household of San Francisco where I lived with two DJ's. DJ Nadia and DJ Black and we hosted a lot of parties and a lot of underground parties. We-we, if we found out there was a space available and we could get

speakers there, no matter what size. We would do it and then, you know, sort of get on the phone tree and be like, just show up. And so, I just remember us throwing parties anywhere.

Abdelhadi: How did you meet them?

Okamoto: So my other really dear friend that I went to college with, Saun-Toy Trotter was living at 806 and I came to San Francisco and I was living down the street and I could no longer, sort of...be in that household. I just, I needed to be somewhere else. So I saw Saun-Toy was like you know "I'm barely at my house, why don't you come over?" So I went there and never left. For 10 years I was just there.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: You know? And we were a household, we were a family, for better and for worse. All of the fun and all of the dysfunction of a family. It was, it's my sweetest, sweetest time.

Okamoto: Was that sort of the beginning of your-of your relationship with other trans folks?

Okamoto: Yes.

Abdelhadi: Or have you like or did this sort of pop up earlier in high school or in [Coughing] middle school? What are some of those really early experiences if you can remember?

Okamoto: Yeah, so like, you know I don't-I don't necessarily attribute some of this stuff of my childhood to necessarily trans, but definitely rejecting the feminine. So I have a very, very, very early memory of begging my father for a racetrack, electronic car racetrack. We would gather at my cousin's house for New Year's Eve and everybody would get one gift. Because they did the whole like "put all your money in and then everyone gets their one gift on their list" or whatever. Mine was to get this racetrack, and my dad proudly just got it for me, you know, and so when I opened it they were so excited they were like "oh my god, I can barely wait to put the track together" because then it's got the electric thing, and then I got to watch the cars zip around. He was a mechanic, so it was just like, you know, all that and then and I remember my aunt, uh and my cousins standing over to the side and they start to chuckle and made a comment about me having this racetrack. That it was so gender. It was-it was funny and somewhat embarrassing to them, is what I could gather. I guess for me it was like it was wrong, and and my dad could give a shit. He was just happy; you know?

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: That would probably be my earliest and then just um...I remember going to you know...going to kindergarten and just my mom wanting me to be in a dress. Just a cute little kid with a bowl cut. And uh, I did it once or twice for her and then it was like "No" and so I...that's my first sort of inkling's about myself and like what I was most comfortable. Then I would say in college I met, I was, I went to college and Antioch is notorious for trying to recruit people, you

know? They're "do good-er" white people. So they're like "lets recruit a lot of people from the cities and we have no infrastructure for them to survive" and it was during you know, during the AIDS epidemic. These-these two children, I call them children. They're adults but the language of children, come and they're, you know, from the house of the ball scene and um, so queer. So gender all over the place and you know, giving all kinds of fabulous. That was really, that was really a special time and a really a part of like this formation that was really just starting to make sense to me...and I guess in some ways feeling comfortable.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: Really comfortable with it. Cause I think other people are really good at pointing it out to me.

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: But I wasn't there, you know?

Abdelhadi: Yeah, Yeah.

Okamoto: Then when I went-then after I graduated, I went to san Francisco and I lived at 806. Yeah, there were-there were all kinds of trans. It was all kinds of trans, trans-ness happening. You know? Foxy Brown from Cameal [?], who's like not trans, but you know so beautiful. Easily could be trans, you know, had all the fabulousness. I remember Rocky, and I remember um uh... names escaping me... she used to run the Pooch Project in San Francisco and would teach girls how to put on make-up. But she lived at our house for quite some time.

Abdelhadi: Yeah, so for folks who might not know, can you talk a little bit about the house structure? What is a house in this particular context, right?

Okamoto: So the ball scene, the ball scene house is, you know, these are houses. They're part of... they're part of a-a underground um... I would say like, social scene. It's an underground economy. It's an underground fabulousness where I think it's most-where it most came to light and surfaced. It's funny, two white folks, Madonna and uh... Livingston. Who did *Paris is Burning*. They brought sort of the house scene into popular culture.

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: So that um...that was around. Then I think what came closer to me was the House of Hope. Which is-which was a house that was started by like Angel. Who's now, he is one of the fathers of House of Infinity, but this was an intervention. It was an HIV/AIDS intervention where House of Hope would come to-come to all of our big, you know, parties. They would come to King Street Garage. They would come to... Dievo Harness would be playing at um... names are escaping me now...

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: But like [inaudible] and these were like massive. Club Universe, and like folks would be like, there would be like 1,000 people and like House of Hope would walk in and they're passing out condoms and they're encouraging people to take HIV tests and stuff like that. So there was that, and there was our house, 806. Which was a group of folks that were, I would say artists, activists, and um I think interventionists. I think-when I think in terms of public health, like we were that space where we were intersecting in all these spaces that our friends were, seroconverting some of us seroconverting, but we were a thinking activist group so, and we were also employed at San Francisco AIDS Department, employed at Operation Concern and employed at G-Chip the you know, the API [Application Programming Interface], you know, HIV services. So and were deep in the club scene and we were throwing clubs, and so it was just a really interesting space. At three O'clock in the morning when you're drunk and on a few other substances you sit around and start talking about work, and you think you have this brilliant idea about an intervention. Then sometimes it really is a brilliant idea. So that's what our house was. Our house was sort of this place where like, if folks were temporarily without a space. Sometimes we used to always say Black would collect people, she would just collect folks, and we would come home and have three new roommates. Like "What happened? How'd this happen?" [laughter] And what are they contributing or not? Like what are picking...So that was our house. I would say it was a deepening of my activism and my race politics. It was definitely at a black nationalist's home and-and it was-it was a real... It was a very um... full life experience to live there. I absolutely, it's definitely, it was just one of the highlights of my life, living at 806.

Abdelhadi: That's amazing! Tell me more about what was happening in your life in your life in terms of...it sounds like you were involved with not just a broad activist circle, but also in your own work around AIDS and other queer issues. So tell me about that. Where were you working? What were you up to?

Okamoto: Yeah so my life sort of... my life conditions and my space was one that I...you know; I-I always knew I had to pay my bills despite other stuff I was involved in. I needed to make sure I kept my home. And so I don't know why, but I was like, maybe it was because my mom was an educator, and I was I like "I know that". My mom very early said "Whatever you do, don't become a teacher. It is- it's just like not...It's underappreciated art and its really leaving you know?". Which to date we can see that like, you know? She comes from an era being tenured as an elementary school teacher. I say that to people now and they're like "Like who? What? And they're like, charter?" And I said "No it's not charter, its public school".

Abdelhadi: [laughter] Yeah.

Okamoto: And so I- I then started working with folks that were, they called them "Severely emotionally disturbed children". There were kids that were being pulled out of their homes because of issues of either violence or you know, not really, or just really deep non-compliance and um, and I worked in that and the educational setting of that. I was more on the behavior-behavioral milieu side, and I did that to pay the bills. I guess in some ways it was like an extension

of my community, you know, I don't think we'd call ourselves severely emotionally disturbed, but I think we can act very emotionally disturbed when you know, you go invisible. Or you can't get your basic needs met, you know?

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: I think in retrospect, I am seeing that these kids, these young kids that I was working with, they weren't getting their needs met, so collectively, you know, to have them in this space. And um...in doing their activism, right? Being exactly who they need to be. You know, kids need to be able to use their voice. They need to be able to exercise their anger their frustration and figure out what is productive and what is not.

Abdelhadi: It sounds like maybe you were doing a lot of unpaid work too for other organizations at the same time.

Okamoto: I was trying to. I was like, um, I didn't like I did not... you know, our house was so much-our house was so much like a [laughter] an organization. People just came to our house; you know? And um...

Abdelhadi: What sorts of people?

Okamoto: Everybody. DJ's, you know, a lot of trans girls. Dancers, a lot of folks that worked at underground economy, substance users, it was um, any-it was precarious, it was like a group of folks that had so much precarity in their life and they were so full of life, and they were so full of art. So um, that's who was really there.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: [Pause] So, so I did that for... I did that and then when it became a part of ABLUNT, Asians, Blacks, and Latin [?] and United New[?] Tribes. That was our-that's our name to run parties. So there were those parties that popped up everywhere. It was like "Oh it was an ABLUNT party" and everyone was like "oh, it's an ABLUNT party", so you knew who was going to be there Asians, Blacks, and Latin [?] and United New [?] Tribes and smoking a lot of weed. Then I jumped off, did and started my own thing called Justice: Just Us, and in collaboration with the ABLUNT and I ran that at the Coco Club. My very, very dear friend, Trish Moran, established the Coco Club on 8th and Mina in San Francisco, and um my other friend Tammy Goda introduced me to the space and Justice lived there.

Abdelhadi: Was justice also a sort of, like organizing parties or that sort of thing? Or what were you up to?

Okamoto: Yeah.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: It was really like a-it was a space where we did spoken word. It was right at the edge of like when New York was already doing the spoken word and um, and the big, what do they call it?

Abdelhadi: The slams.

Okamoto: The slams.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: and um, it had not really gotten to the West Coast yet, but I was like "Oh my God, I need to" ...

Abdelhadi: We need to do this.

Okamoto: "I need to do this". And so I had this club. It was predominately women of color which became just, you know, just became people of color in general and everybody performed there. I mean, anybody. I mean Samin Bashir, who has three books out now. Kara Paige, Omar Daniel, Zander Garcia, Christopher Lee, showed his films there who started Tranny Fest. Che Villanueva who did several books. It was just like the spot. It was the spot and we gathered there and it was community. It was definitely a milestone in our organizing. Imani Uzuri, who's in like New York now.

Abdelhadi: What, what it sounds like... I'm really curious about this sort of relationship between art and activism, and I think one of the things I'm getting from you is like you're talking about the-them at once. I think that's incredible and reflective of that time period in ways that have kind of changed, the boundaries are much clearer. The boundaries are much clearer. In clear spaces.

Okamoto: When you like, it's something that I think about a lot, because I do oral history on house music and the AIDS epidemic. There's something, you know. there was something really... um, there was something really fucked up about that time and its that like... that thing around death, art, and sex is really, really true. Like people were, people were dying. Like I mean, it was just a regular, it was visual too, because the HIV medications at that time... it did facial wasting, so folks had these very gaunt faces. Then that medication also created this like pot belly, and so you could, you could literally look and if they were on the medication, you're like "Oh, that person's positive", you know? It was really a very normal, I don't want to say normal, its just seared in my memory seeing these guys, with like, I'm sure at one time filled their Levi's and packed it in, and looked juicy. But hanging off their bodies with their leather jackets, that are like now 4 sizes too big, you know, and their hair thinning and um, and that was really what I saw. And-and when you see that and you see your friends [pause] um... fighting their lives, [crying] it's that energy. It's like, it's creative, you know, and so, you know the footage that Sarah Shulman has, you know, and stuff- It captures a particular population of people with HIV and dying of AIDS, but there were so many more. I think like when you when you compress all of that...you can't-

you can't separate it. You can't, you know, talk about like... I know for Nadia, it's like... she can't really talk about house music and not talk about the epidemic, and not talk about like being at the end of and San Francisco and playing a set for Aaron O. Who died, you know, who like, you know who-who died of AIDS. They didn't get to say goodbye to him, you know, there was some family intervention and you know, they get swept away and, and so then all they have is each other, right? And so its like "fuck it". We're gonna have a celebration, you know? It's like, "We're gonna have a celebration for Aaron O, were gonna play those last records that he was so juiced about getting". Like from the-they would all pick up the records from, I forgot what it was called, but they there was a place where everyone would go pick up the records when the new stuff came out. So in one of my, in one of my interviews with Nadia, she was just like you know, "I just played the fuck out of this last set for her, for Aaron"]. And that was what we did. We were just at the end so, like... what is that right? What is that right? That's activism! That's like holding, that's holding community and organizing and making visible something that like I feel like-I feel like in many ways they were trying to make invisible communities of color, you know? So I also remember just living far enough from the Castro. Where the Castro was like just inundated with HIV, you know, every kind of HIV like educational whatever, and folks come into my house, which was in the Western Addition in the Fillmore, and they're like "I don't know how the fuck you get this stuff", you know? They didn't know like "Oh, if I have syphilis, then I can get HIV?". But those are different. So the outreach was so small that we were taking stuff and out of love and preservation for our community, we were teaching each other.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: You know?

Abdelhadi: Trying to fill the gaps in the communities of color. Yeah.

Okamoto: Yeah, and I think particular that was really hard for the trans girls because the trans girls that were hanging out in the Castro was like... they like... folks weren't asking the girls what they were doing. It's like transphobic in its own-own way, was like this, like "We see you you", but like, you know, "we don't know how to ask you". It's like just ask.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: Yeah, and when someone finally did, it was like "Oh!"-oh, you guys are sleeping with a whole other population of people. You're know? It was like-you're not sleeping with gay men and you're not sleeping with lesbians. You're sleeping with this whole, you know, other population, which Andrea Horn coined the "Menses". That's what we used to call them. We didn't know how to- we didn't know how-we didn't know how to like... there was no language for them. There were men who dated transwomen. We just called them the "Menses" on the project. They were different you know, they often times went home to their wife and they had kids, typically maybe lived in a suburb or you know, carrying-living a very heteronormative life.

Also, um sometimes having a short term or long term relationship with the one or more trans women. So...

Abdelhadi: Whoa!

Okamoto: Yeah.

Abdelhadi: It sounds like there was kind of layers of invisibility that you guys were trying to fight in terms of whether its kind of addressing queer folks in along, uh communities of color or addressing trans folks in gay communities. Or in kind of under the broader umbrella, it's interesting. It seems like you guys were ahead on-on the intersectional, you know?

Okamoto: Yeah, we were definitely Venn diagramming hard, you know? For sure.

Abdelhadi: Totally.

Okamoto: Yeah you totally, you-you totally nailed it! Yeah that's really interesting and that's how we lived you know what I mean? That's just how we lived.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: Some of us were professionals and like hanging out and like, you know?

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: And doing all kinds of things.

Abdelhadi: Right.

Okamoto: Participating in the underground economy, it was just it was very intersectional.

Abdelhadi: Yeah, what were some of the um, I know from talking to you outside of this interview, there were some highlight moments in terms of your time in San Francisco. Especially in terms of activism and these sort of kind of... uh... well fuck the word pioneer but, [laughter]. you know, these like...

Okamoto: First moments.?

Abdelhadi: Yeah, forefront moments.

Okamoto: I guess you shouldn't say first because you never know if it's a first.

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: But it's so like high impact.

Abdelhadi: Yeah high impact moments! Whether they were high impact for you personally or you feel high impact for these layered communities you were serving, tell me a little about those.

Okamoto: Yeah so I guess I want to note and mark that my first, my first research work was coming out of UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] and I worked for the Women's Health Project and we were looking at women of color who had sort of what we called kind of like a double trauma. And not trauma meaning by what happened, but also the impact of society. They were women of color who had histories of child sexual abuse and were HIV positive. This was a really important study, we were not trying to say that the impact of child sexual abuse was the reason why people became, were HIV positive. It was so complicated, it's so much more complicated and I think the other things that, there was a really good intervention that was put in place that-that I was one of the main facilitators running. I think it was a 7-week intervention and what we realized is that the one-year post, right? You're supposed to- that's when you're supposed to show increase in knowledge, and you're supposed to show change in behavior. But it was at the two-year mark when it all started to come together. All that stuff, all that stuff we talked about, all that-all the work we did, was really changing lives. Like it was really, um...

Abdelhadi: What was some of the work? Tell me about the interventions.

Okamoto: So-so this one, it-it was behavioral, it really was just like, one, getting women to get to know their bodies, and so there were-was homework. Some of the women had never looked at their vagina, and they were given mirrors [laughter] and they had to journal about that. We also taught them tools of like how to negotiate sex by you know, basically lying if you had to. So like just-I just thought it was like cool because say things like you have a yeast infection, and dudes will be like "uh that's cool, let me just, you know, back away". They don't, like... they... most guys don't understand. And we were just like utilize those words. Those give you these moments where you can negotiate something else, right? Give him a blow job or a hand job or something like that.

Abdelhadi: This was with intimate partners or?

Okamoto: This was with intimate partners. This was, you know, if they were doing an exchange work or whatever...

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: A lot of them had primary partners, and some of them were on HIV medications and had not told their-their partner did not even know they were HIV positive. I mean imagine the kind of energy every single day to hide-hide you, you know, because the fear of being alone was great like, its like "Now I'm HIV positive, like who's gonna be with me?", you know?

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: And I think that goes to talk about the dislocation of you know, white gay men were finding community and bonding over their HIV status and women of color were just like “Holy fuck”, you know, “all I see I see is a road alone”.

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: Like being completely you know, um... because of communities are then tight knit, that like the rumor mill starts and then they're the pariah. And so I started there working with Gail Wyatt and then I got on the Trans Project at UCSF [University of California, San Francisco] and I was on that and... ran the intervention there and...

Abdelhadi: What is the Trans Project?

Okamoto: The Trans Project was transgender, let me see, resource-Transgender Resource and Neighborhood Space. I think is what the name of it was. We were housed in on Bush and Taylor, I believe. So we had a drop in space and also it's where we did the intervention, and also where I ran sort of. I was doing a double kind of intervention with like substance use, so basically what we had was that, we had Walden house, where Gina Eichenbaum was one of the therapists there. Who was also a trans woman. And she had fought to get have several beds who were for trans folks, so what we did was kind of link with these different places. But Walden House was our main hub, so of course, there were like a million women that wanted to go in. They wanted to address their substance use issues as well as have stable housing, right? But there was like five beds, right? So while they were in the queue waiting to get a bed, they would come to see me. And we would do intervention work. And we would do a lot of it was based on the stuff I was learning or I had learned with Gail Wyatt over at the Women's Health Project. So um, many of them then ended up going through Walden House. I think I would say definitely a good proportion of them really done well in terms of like getting to a place where... they could manage their substance use and get their-their selves together. How they wanted to be as a woman, you know, how they wanted to do their make up and how they wanted to dress. It gave them pause to do those things and um, and find a kind of happiness, you know, it wasn't...and this is one of the things we learn. Women of color, trans women of color, they didn't-they could give a shit about passing, that was really, that was a white thing. White trans ladies were just like, they were just like obsessed with passing. And like, POC [People of Color] folks were just kinda like “Yeah I wanna have a dress on and walk down the street, and not get an egg thrown at my head, I just, you know?”. It was really different, like it was really, really marked.

Abdelhadi: Yeah, what do you think? Yeah I mean it sounds like a lot about crisis-crisis management as well in their sort of day to day lives. Okay well like...what was your sense of kind of broader community context that these folks were living in?

Okamoto: Um precarity. I think a lot of folks were super marginally housed, we were based in the Tenderloin.

Abdelhadi: Yeah

Okamoto: Tenderloin was designed for um our SRO, single resident occupancy so there were a lot of small, small you know efficiency apartments and they were great. They were great to get folks into housing immediately. Because we know that like once you get someone who's positive into housing, their higher risk behavior decreases by 50 percent.

Abdelhadi: Wow!

Okamoto: So housing was a very, very, very important part of and so when house of-house [?] came to, that was just a game changer, you know, and for trans folks and especially for trans women. It's just like, "fuck", the day to day upkeep is a lot. Just, having a place to shave, and having a place to put your make up on properly, is a lot. You know?

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: Um and so having a private space to do that was really important.

Abdelhadi: Was there also, you know, was there a lot of conversation around or work around things around hormones or surgery at that point?

Okamoto: Yeah, I think it was just across the board like, you know, at that point you had to go get like 1,000 different signatures and go to a million meetings and you know, be in therapy for I don't know how long, it was like, 6 months or a year. Some crazy thing.

Abdelhadi: Whoa!

Okamoto: I mean now its funny right, because we worked so hard and know its like, people get that if somebody says like "No, this is what I'm feeling".

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: We've made medical, we made the medical aspects of transitioning available. Right? And we've lowered that threshold significantly. I mean, it still needs to be lower but like, just talking to you about this it makes me... it reminds of like "holy shit", like you'd be exhausted by the time, you know, got your hormones, and like "I hate everybody", you know.

Abdelhadi: And of course it means being able to to go to therapy regularly for a year requires a certain stability that from your saying was really inaccessible to working class or, you know, super precarious trans folks of color.

Okamoto: Yeah, and I remember my other friend Lolana Valencia and a couple of other people. They started working at the Tom Waddell clinic in San Francisco, and that's where all the trans girls would go to get their hormones.

Abdelhadi: Whoa!

Okamoto: And that was really important. That like was so many of those things shifted and policy, it shifted ideas of what is possible, you know, it was kind of amazing, um... and that work seemed so hard, and then and now its like really, you know, it's really changed things.

Abdelhadi: Yeah you have a lot to be proud of.

Okamoto: Yeah, I'm really proud of these folks who really stuck with it and the nurses that advocated the, you know, the doctors. Like I worked for one of the most well known doctors in San Francisco that just fought tooth and nail for harm reduction, for hormones, for-like all kinds of... like streets, we used to do sidewalk services. So if people were in an episode and they couldn't come in the, well we will give them medical care and do their appointment on the street where they feel safe, you know, it's like...

Abdelhadi: Sounds so intuitive.

Okamoto: Yeah, it's like... Reed Focault [?] You know, [laughter] that's...

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: You know step into their world.

Abdelhadi: Yeah, you were telling me in a broader framework some of these high impact moments, were there others that you wanted to note?

Okamoto: Yeah just note, I think its important to-to thank everybody for the place where I am today is because of these people who paved the path before me, you know, be it Gail Wyatt, or be it the work I did at UCSF [University of California, San Francisco], I then went to the Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center, which became Tenderloin Health and I ran the community center side which saw over 6, over 300 people a day.

Abdelhadi: Wow!

Okamoto: Um, TARP [Trans Advocacy in Rural Places] was established by trans women, for trans women dying of AIDS. So it was an incredible privilege to be there. It was, uh it was like, it's still is a high honor for me to have served the community there, you know?

Abdelhadi: What was your day to day like there?

Okamoto: It-it was hell! It was crazy, it was chaotic. It-it was um, it like, you don't know harm reduction until you are at a place where it is, t holds you accountable to harm reduction, like no part of your rigidity is going to allow-is going to be allowed into this space, because that doesn't

work, right? So we didn't know how to do it and our... I would often have to pull from other, the therapists that worked there and stuff like what the attendance rate was for groups and stuff like that. We were always in the high 90's to 100th percentile, like it was just amazing.

Abdelhadi: Yeah

Okamoto: And um, and...

Abdelhadi: Do any memories pop up for you from that time period, any stories?

Okamoto: Yeah when I became, when I was hired to the run that, I'm like, "I'm hiring trans girls", I mean they built this. So then, I hired, I was probably one of the organizations that had the most number of trans people working.

Abdelhadi: Wow!

Okamoto: At one moment I had 25 supervisees and they worked in every capacity, they worked at every time of the day and night. We were open from six in the morning until 11 at night. Yeah, it was a great-it was hard work and it was great. It was really hard work. That was highlight for me. The trans march, the 1st trans march ever in San Francisco. It was kind of one of those things where you don't know how significant it is when its happening and then its like "Holy shit!", like that was like that was-that was really important!

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: The work I did in the San Francisco jails with the Estella Gonzales for forensic aids project and Kate, ugh Kate-I'm sorry I'm forgetting your last name. She was-she was just essential to getting us in the door and we just fucking, between Marcus Arona [?], um... Old Man Bowl [?], he goes by Gina Eichenbaum, Estella Gonzales and myself, we really gave voice to trans women who were um, in the tanks and at 850 Bryant.

Abdelhadi: That's a jail?

Okamoto: Yeah, and they had a-there was a trans women tank, and you would go all the way down the line and general population, and then go around the corner, and that where all the trans girls were. I remember one of the things. I went down there and was like "Damn it's cold up here!" and they were like "Yeah that windows cracked" and I'm like "What the?" Like "Well, we gotta get that fixed!". And then-and someone casually said to me, "Yeah, that really sucks when you have night sweats", and then I had just the light went on and I was like "Holy shit, this whole tank probably gets night sweats because that was one of the side effects of being HIV, right?". And disproportionately trans women were affected by HIV, so they were coming down with pneumonia and sick all the time. It was like...

Abdelhadi: Whoa

Okamoto: We gotta get this fixed, you know, and Marcus um, Old Man Bowl [?], was working for the Human Rights Commission, and so I just called him up and was like “Dude”, and he’s a trans guy, and I was like “Dude, we gotta like...how do we like get this fixed tonight?”. He was like “What? What is? What happened?” And that week we got the like quality of life in the most “shittiest” of places, one could say that there’s any quality of life. Like we at least, you know could do that. Then shortly after that we started detailing all the harassment that was happening. And those girls they, they took it, because once the-once the the sheriffs center knew that we were coming for them they made life really hard for those girls. They were-they were like determined, we’re going to, we’re doing this. You know? Then we set up all these different ways in which, if things got really horrible, that they would know how to call health services. And they-we would we would have code words, and then we had a booklet we would sneak in and then the girls would pass it to each other. So it was really cool. I just- I didn’t realize, I think again, because you’re working so hard, what impact that was happening. Then it finally came to a moment where we had been fighting and fighting and fighting, and we were like “Put the trans girls in the female tanks!” and like “Stop putting them in the men’s ward”. So that like, I just remember that, that like moment. It got to a place to... even for people to contemplate on the decision maker level, right?

Abdelhadi: Yeah, did they eventually move them?

Okamoto: Unfortunately, they’re still on the men’s floor as far as I know.

Abdelhadi: But they’re separated out from the... yeah.

Okamoto: Yeah, that was just important.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: To have the main whoever, I forgot what they’re called, but the main, you know people residing over the jails to be like “Wait do we move them over to St. Bruno at the girls...”, you know, they were really engaging with that. And the other was like, um if, the if the-if-if the trans folks got arrested they could say I’m trans and that they are separated but in the tanks, they’re not in the gender segregated tanks, that was really important.

Abdelhadi: That’s a big deal.

Okamoto: Getting, one of the things I learned, because of one of my roommates, his boyfriend called the cops on him, they were having a domestic violence situation, he was undocumented, the other guy was a lawyer.

Abdelhadi: Oh.

Okamoto: He called the cops on my friend who was undocumented, and he ended up in jail and he was without his HIV medications. I can tell you, that week he spent in jail caused his death...

Abdelhadi: Oh.

Okamoto: You know it, it, 7 days later he did not look like the same person. From there on we were in and out of the hospital with him all the time. I mean he left his boyfriend and came to live with us, um and so that was really important. We have to find a way; that-they cannot wait a week. Just for, you know, who I consider my brother, having lived that experience, I was like "We can't, this cannot happen, and so how do we make this different?". And Estella was brilliant and she's like "You call health services and tell them your suicidal and they have to come to your tank in 15 mins. 15 minutes-half and hour"]. So we told the girls and we said when they get and when they pull you out, "I'm on HIV medications, this is my doctor, and this-this is what I'm taking."

Abdelhadi: And then they get the medication.

Okamoto: Until the protocol got put in place that-that-they had to have their medications within x amount of hours, like that's what-[claps] that's what we did!

Abdelhadi: Wow!

Okamoto: So those are some highlights.

Abdelhadi: Yeah, tell me about your time in San Francisco. What was happening with you personally? What... was your, I know you were living in the house, and uh 806 you said?

Okamoto: 806, hey!

Abdelhadi: What about you and your experiences with gender and your sexuality? What was going on in that time period?

Okamoto: Yeah um, I think um, I think I was deeply, you know the idea of like transitioning was not something that seemed easy or possible like there were just too many other things going. I was just like I'm like "I'm not giving up all this fun to be you know, in this like cycle of like craziness. To get hormones and so forth". My friend Christopher Lee had transitioned, and I saw what a toll it took on him. You know, just fight for his visibility. He was a creative genius in his own right. But like, I just saw what it did, and I was like "Fuck that", I'm not... you know, I want to do the work on the ground. The trauma-the trauma and the truth of, of watching people die, you, I just became outside of myself. You know what I mean, it was really-it was community, and I lived in that house that was community. We met on those spaces that we had these things in common, and not so much individualized. So I think for me, I was so much more identity focused as a cultural activist or as a community person and less thinking about my own identity. I think now because I have more time and I'm in a different class. I'm not apart of the working class. I'm-I live

a very middle class life now. I have that time to think about me, you know, who do I want to be? Who do I want to look like? What I imagine myself to be, um... I don't think I had the time before.

Abdelhadi: Yeah

Okamoto: You know?

Abdelhadi: Its really interesting

Okamoto: Really when I think about it, we just didn't go there... I don't know. Dejah! That's who I was talking about earlier. Dejah Dior, trans girl who lived at my house. Gotta say her name.

Abdelhadi: So, then how did you end up moving to New York?

Okamoto: So so I was at... while I was at-while I was at UCSF [University of California, San Francisco] doing the trans project, I met Gayathri [?]. We then um, grew into a relationship and then during that time I then transitioned to Tenderloin's AIDS Resource Center, which then became Tenderloin Health. Then we had, then Schwarzenegger became the governor and California went bankrupt and so I had to pink slip my whole team and...

Abdelhadi: Oh wow...

Okamoto: Then I had to pink slip myself, and then they defunded. I had gotten, when I started the budget was \$250,000. I got the budget up to a million and then they started removing money. Then it went to \$500,000 and then it went down to zero. But I'm very thankful for some of the folks I worked with there. That was amazing. Gerbari Allah, and Greg Kats who was at the department of health, who just like... he was just he was just awesome. He guided me in this process of watching stuff really come down and they start pulling the money. It's just like "Help me prioritize Greg". "How do we fight and how do we prioritize?". Like I can't forgo my community who's showing up every day, so what like... how we will best use this system that is being taken away from us? And at the same time in the evening "I'll see you at city hall". Like fucking up the supervisors, like fight harder, so Bernice, um forgetting her last name... Lardro Guzman [?], Vero, all these people. Bette Ledder, all these folks. Jeannie Little, all part of making it happen like we were. It was community. It was never one person. But there was definitely Azar, Azar Namdar [?]. He was just awful, he, he, he had a certain kind of evil in him to be...participate in the removal of funds for people who were so fucking desperate.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: You know?

Abdelhadi: Um, so-and then so-you, so-so you-so you were just starting your relationship with Gayathri, and then did she? Did you guys move to New York because she got a job there, or?

Okamoto: Yeah, she was teaching at UC Davis [University of California, Davis] and landed the job at NYU [New York University] and so for uh, for four years. We lived separately, in two.

Abdelhadi: In New York?

Okamoto: No I stayed in San Francisco because I was in a good position where I could advocate. I was high enough up to walk into supervisor's offices and be like "I want a meeting with you", and so like, I understood what that meant, because I had the pulse on the road. I hadn't become an administrative person, so far way from what was happening. So I wanted to stay.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: At the same time, you know my love was far away, so after 2 years of us commuting and then...California went bankrupt.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: You know, Gayathri, was like "Well I guess you its time, you could have a go in New York", and so then I moved to New York in 2009.

Abdelhadi: What was that like? What were your early impressions of New York?

Okamoto: I think for me that was that moment of liberation, I was like "Oh, now I can" because when you're in a city for that long and people have investments in who you are, for me to um, to be-to be more fully who I was, I think it was a lot of work I didn't want to do with my friends. They needed to say goodbye to the old Tei, and they needed to-to retrain themselves on pronouns. My work life, it was already, I already had transitioned there. But in my personal life, I just was like I think I sold them all short too and was like, they're not going to be able to handle this. But when I got to New York, it was a fresh start. Everything changed for me, and I was like throw these fucking clothes away, this is-you know? This is where I want go. I also don't have a masculine trans identity that's U.S. based. That... just not a kind of masculinity that I quite understand. So um, my and and the way...how I appear outwardly is much more of a J-pop, you know, K-pop kind of esthetic.

Abdelhadi: [laughter] Sure.

Okamoto: That makes sense to me, that feels very aligned, you know, so I really kind of affirmed that when I went to Taiwan and I was like "Ah! yes, this is alright", you know? [laughter] So I went there and life was really kind to me. I transitioned in and I got a job immediately. I worked at Project Street Beat, at Planned Parenthood. It was a subset of Planned Parenthood, but we did interventions on Black communities and Bed Stuy, in deep Brooklyn. We did all kinds of HIV; you know? It was all mostly, straight and discordant couples and then I opened the Trans Health Clinic, at um, in Asian Organization, which was extremely disappointing.

Abdelhadi: Why?

Okamoto: It was bureaucratic, it was bullshit. It was fighting this fight that I was just like, I just wanted to eye roll the cherry picking that was being done of like withholding hormones. To women, to trans women who were HIV positive, that chose not to take their HIV medication. Which is illegal, you cannot do that. You can have your medical license taken away for doing that and yet this organization was doing that regularly, and and it kind of you know, had I not had said anything, they would have continued to do this. At the same time, this was not sustainable for me because I-they had created such a culture of fear for people to speak up that-and-and there were so many immigrants that worked there. It was the perfect incubator of imperialism, and I say that, I mean that. The way in which some people act at the top, the senior administrators, ran it like an imperialist project. It was-it was so gross, and the way in which their politics were with the wind, I remember one-one week it was like, Christy, I forgot her name. She ran for, she ran um... remember the woman...she ran with, against Weiner...

Abdelhadi: Oh, I know who you're talking about.

Okamoto: She had the shittiest politics.

Abdelhadi: She had terrible politics!

Okamoto: Our organization was like "We're backing her" and I was like "Why?! She's not good", you know, "She's promising us funding", and I'm like "What about every other fucking organization out there that she's not promising". Like where's you? You have zero alliance!

Abdelhadi: Zero integrity, yeah.

Okamoto: I ran into Tom Dwayne at the really funny place, he has great politics um and we had sort of a side conversation. That just affirmed everything for me, where he's just like "That-it's so good you left that organization, they-they will just go with the money, they don't have a thing", you know? Aside from like every senior administrator there is not having sex on top of that, they're, you know? [laughter].

Abdelhadi: That's clear! [laughter]

Okamoto: And were supposed to be running these-these interventions and resources and so...

Abdelhadi: So where'd you go after that?

Okamoto: So after that I left, and I got into my art. I started doing, I was working much more in the underground economy. I was doing iron work. I also worked with a how do you say? [inaudible] in African, art collective, we were in the Whitney Biennial.

Abdelhadi: What kind of art? Tell me about your art? What's your favorite project?

Okamoto: So the project that went in the Whitney Biennial was a film. The whole project was initiated by Sienna Shields, who's just an amazing, amazing artist and really cool cats running around the project, Kelsey Lou, Manchild Black, not Manchild Black, but the Blacks, Monsta [?] Black, uh like forgetting names, um...

Abdelhadi: So what was the film about?

Okamoto: I guess you just have to see it. [laughter] It's like a visual orgasm, it's just-it's just really kind of amazing. A piece commissioned, Dawn Lundy wrote the-the poem, it's in I think four or five parts. So we did, uh we did a film an interpretation, it's a little afro-futuristic. You'll watch it. [laughter].

Okamoto: Sure. What's it called? [laughter]

Abdelhadi: The names escaping me now, man okay... It'll come back.

Abdelhadi: That's okay.

Okamoto: I was a Rockwood Fellow when I got to New York. I was also on the CLAGS [Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies] board. I was also uh...

Abdelhadi: CLAGS [Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies] beings the center for?

Okamoto: Lesbian and gay studies. At CUNY [City University of New York], I was also on, I got another fellow situation. I can't remember the name of it now, but that's important.

Abdelhadi: So what was your day-to-day like?

Okamoto: Saving uh, oh and I was on the board of QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice], so that consumed a lot of my time. I was like "How do we save QEJ?". At that point I was the board chair.

Abdelhadi: What's the QEJ?

Okamoto: Queers for Economic Justice. So I worked daily with our accountants and uh the writing was on the wall, like "okay how do we save this"? And there were really different opinions about how that was going to happen. At some point when I realized, I knew these are the ways QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] can exist, we had to let go of certain things, meaning like a space we could no longer afford. The resistance to doing that, I feel like this is self-sabotage. What is more important than this space was the fact that QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] existed. Right? No one was doing that in houses.

Abdelhadi: For sure.

Okamoto: And then I just sort of transitioned off the board and uh I was shortly thereafter. Not because of my leaving. It was shortly thereafter that QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] closed. Which it was really sad.

Abdelhadi: What was the goal of QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice]? Like an anti-capitalist org?

Okamoto: Yeah, I would say it was that. I would say it was a lot of playing in the swamp of economics, you know, really thinking about and reframing things, and keeping class in the conversation. I think that's just really hard, its just really hard to do. People are so willing to talk about race, but they're not really willing to talk about class.

Abdelhadi: Yeah absolutely.

Okamoto: So uh...

Abdelhadi: Well it's interesting because you've been in New York for some of the major movement-moments in the last decade. How did those come into your life or not come into your life? Whether things like occupy, the various, square occupations that have happened. [pause] So we were just talking about being in New York for these movement-moments recently, whether its occupy or you know various abolition movements that have popped up.

Okamoto: BLM [Black Lives Matter]

Abdelhadi: BLM [Black Lives Matter] especially. How have you related to those as an artist or an activist or as a person in the world?

Okamoto: Yeah um, you know moving moving to New York, after you know, farther along than mid-career and then having to remake yourself. Is, that-that took-that took a lot of energy and I think also not feeling New York in that way. Not wanting to have New York behavior around, it's much more "gay for pay" in New York. I just-it's just not true to me and so I just didn't have that in me and I think-I think two parts: one is that my girl is a public figure and also at a pretty well known University, as well in being one of the most desired programs. It makes-it makes it really hard to be in public space without her feeling like she's at work. And she's really, she finds her downtime really important. It keeps her sanity so, we did less and less. That was, in that sphere and more in the academic realm, I think it, think it's also just because I was trying to find my community and trying to be in it, and like trying to-us to have more of a private life. And I know this sounds crazy but...

Abdelhadi: No!

Okamoto: Its weird when you like go to Twitter and you put in you girlfriends name and somebody has all this stalker stuff, of like "Oh, I see you know Gayathri sitting and Washington Park and reading x book", and you're like "You weirdo, and like what the fuck?". So I think all of that made me withdrawal a little bit. I would have loved to be more in the conversation in general population.

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: You know. but it's really-I've really been much more engaged with academics and more on the...and using... and used my resources differently there so I'm like well, I'm not out in these spaces. I'm not having these conversations in the ways that like I like to be but like, I have access to a lot of fucking people that like can make change, you know, and so that's what I do. Now I'm like I work for JVP, [Jewish Voice for Peace] and when the stuff comes up, especially like, you know, the slightest stuff, or you know, when ASA [Adaptive Security Appliance] got attacked, or when Anthro [?] got attacked. It's like, I have access to a lot of these people and I approached them and asked them if they can be apart of the work were doing for JVP [Jewish Voice for Peace]. I still like to leverage my activism in those ways. I think interesting something that happened very recently, that happened with you and I, when we were, you had asked me a simple question around, "Do I have any people that I could raise up for the BLM?" and and I pulled out all these names of people who have been doing the work for forever, and just didn't put the bumper sticker on themselves, you know, you know, my friend Major who is at Juilliard. Who's like probably one of the only Black professors there, who looks for all the Black kids that are coming through this incredibly intimidating and, you know, highly competitive institution, and watches out for them, you know? Or just just like folks that um are at the intersection.

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: You know its' like no one talks about the intersection, but pull people from the intersection that are doing that work or doing that health care, doing the work with education.

Abdelhadi: What do you think is being "invisible-ized", do you think its generational thing?

Okamoto: Oh, I definitely think its generational and um I've heard that time and time again. My friend Joan Morgan who did um... *When the Chicken Heads Come Home to Roost*, she just read the audience. Because like there was a millennial who got all righteous, and she's like "You know what? Sit down! You don't, you think you just invented electricity?!" [laughter] "You know? You don't think people were trying to invent electricity before you? Brilliant one? Invented the electricity?"

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: And she just did a ream [?]. I'm just sick of it, like I-I didn't start this, my fore-mothers started. Give people name, give people presence, give people existence, right? That was um...that I feel like it, I don't, it's disappeared. I don't, its-its just weird, unless you're Barbara Ramsey, in

it. Who's like, [claps] in it. She gets praises and she should, but there's other people that don't. They can't, like Major can't do that. Major's taking care of the Black kids at Juilliard. Like, Monsta [?] and Manchild Black are bringing blackness and "fabulouscity" to the world through their art, and so we can't forget about these people who made it important that...

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: Black folks are like even a conversation.

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: And you know centering the conversation.

Abdelhadi: Yeah, continuity. Yeah, not severing those-those ties and recognizing that continuity.

Okamoto: I think it was really... when you, I just, just realized there is a real big intergenerational gap going on. Like Margo Guzelray [?], Black Inokiowan [?] you know? On the board at the training center in Tennessee, shoot I'm forgetting her name. Highlander, you know? Research and training center. The work she's done. Her name does not fall down from the lips of a 23-year old, or a 43-year old even. And it should!

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: You know? Joel Gomez, Jane Moraga [?].

Abdelhadi: Sure.

Okamoto: All these people that were working, you know, Joel Gomez...

Abdelhadi: I want to ask you one thing that hasn't come up as much, and you talked about it in the beginning of the interview, and I kind of want to thread it as well. Is your relationship with that sort that-that early community? That first community that in your life that you mentioned you your parents. The-the sort of of working class, um... Asian American neighborhood you grew up in. What's been their role in your life through these stages?

Okamoto: Yeah, interesting so uh, my friend, Alice Hum and I have conversations about this because she grew up in the Chinese community in Pasadena. And I was like "Girl, there's something about silence that's really productive". I was like-because a lot of Asian, uh a lot of folks who grew up in Asian families, sexuality doesn't exist. It really just leaves this kind of open and silent space, and it really...that-that space, that space gave me a lot of room to grow. Because for my parents to comment on my gender or any of those things meant that I-I was also a sexual being, or that I also had some kind of like...I had some kind of, um there something going on, right? To be able to talk about gender is to say also that like, it is an opposition to. Which means your engaging in some kind of social thing that's too close to sexual-sexual anything. [laughter] I

don't know if this is making sense. Its just a very, I don't want to say "asexual" environment, its just silent. It's just silent. That was really helpful for me. That silence was as if my parents had opened the... just were holding the doors open. That's how I choose to see it. I can't-I don't want to be a victim or uh, you know, "that was a shitty life kind of thing". They just like, they held the door open. We didn't talk about... I got to experiment with my clothes, my haircut, my esthetic, and there wasn't going to be anything said, and I knew that.

Abdelhadi: And even after it changed over the years, there was no comment?

Okamoto: There was no comment, there was no like gender monitoring, or like um... yeah.

Abdelhadi: And was there an awareness of the community you resided in this type of work you were doing? The composition of your community? [Pause] Like one thing I've heard, you know, even if-is like even if, one thing I've heard in queer spaces is people discuss how even if they're not necessarily saying to their parents "I'm this identity or that identity or whether it's a gender identity or a sexual identity". Even the very-their activities or their composition of their community brings that into conversation. So their like, so the parent might think "Why are all your friends gay?" [laughter] Or all your work surrounding...

Okamoto: Gay folks.

Abdelhadi: Yeah, and that sort of forces the issue. Did that pop up at all?

Okamoto: Well I think, they-they- I imposed my friendships on them. Because I grew up in a very, like... it's a very Hawaiian, you know, culture, community, right? So I always grew up with a million people around me, and that's what I did. I brought people home. So they were exposed to queerness very early. Again, you know, and again, them reflecting on it verbally would just be like to admit, to somehow be making comment on sexuality. So it was just like-you know, and they loved everybody like they were um, very important friends of mine! I appreciated that.

Abdelhadi: And did you ever bring any partners home?

Okamoto: I did, yeah.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: And they were very tolerant of that. Yeah, they were very tolerant. Obviously some knew... it was obvious that they liked some more than others.

Abdelhadi: Sure. [laughter]

Okamoto: [laughter] I think they saw my gender expression changing too and they were cool with it, you know, because I think it was from very early on that sort of gender and sexuality thing for them was murky. They didn't separate those, but it worked to my advantage, you know, so that...

Abdelhadi: That's good to keep those things apart, yeah. That's really interesting because so often people associate silence with repression, but it seems like in your case it was more like space.

Okamoto: Yeah. It wasn't disapproving, it wasn't negative. It was just not...

Abdelhadi: It was just not true.

Okamoto: It was like a void space, you know, and so Alice and I talked about that. I feel like it was an opportunity. It was an opportunity for me to actually have a healthy thought about like, not fighting for my identity you know? Fighting for my life? But it was like "Oh, I can play here, cause like I know they're not going to mess with me". [laughter] I know the gender, I know the cultural codes, and I'm gonna take advantage of that.

Abdelhadi: Sure, that's great. Yeah, you told me that now you're at... so now you're still living in New York and you're working for JVP [Jewish Voice for Peace]. You mentioned that you're planning on moving back to LA?

Okamoto: Yup.

Abdelhadi: Are you excited? What do you think is next for you?

Okamoto: Yeah, I'm really excited about that and um... I think uh...I just I've like moved to this other kind of space where I need to really, I need to pause on it a bit. I don't know if its because like one of the things that really changed for me when I moved to New York, is that my primary social circle are mostly gay men. Those are the spaces I frequent, and those are the people I hang out with, and so like that's a really-that's a big change for me. I don't even hang with trans girls that much anymore it's like...It's really good gay men. You know? [laughter] And so I have a lot of excitement about going home and because I have...a really nice house there that I do feel like with the age of ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] these days and the kind of bullshit they're doing with immigration that like... I remember when we had safe houses, and I have a house that's safe, and I am really open to making that a space, you know, not just like community and art, but its like for living, you know, and that-we think about designing, you know? I've talked to my friends there, if we, if we have safe houses, it's not just like housing people, but how do we support a living wage? Meaning, how each one of those people? How can each one of those these people make between 45 and 60,000 dollars a year, you know, living in Los Angeles, you can live a good life, you know, how do we make that happen? Like I can always open a bed. I can always open a floor, or whatever. Beyond that, like how do we create an economy that's sustainable for folks that are in the crosshairs. So that they're... so that they have that-that very really stressor and threat that they may be removed, you know, from-from, from their um... what is home for them right? Which is like the United States. But they don't have to struggle for a piece of bread, or a pair of shoes or a new shirt, or "what the fuck am I going to wear to court?". Can they have? You know what I mean? And that's what I don't see people talking about!

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: Like I wanna build that structure. I want to be apart of that, like...let's acknowledge capitalism. [laughter] It just takes a certain amount of money to live and then like, can we do that as a community? Or are we one of those communities that if we make that much money, then you know, they're going to have opinions about things, you know, it's like I really-that's-that's-that's my next goal.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: You know?

Abdelhadi: I see a thread through work of... you know, being really concerned with people's material conditions, right? You know?

Okamoto: Yeah.

Abdelhadi: Being a kind of day to day survival, which is um... so it seems like that would be-that seems like such an intuitive next step for you to work on that, that's exciting!

Okamoto: How do we get artists to sell a piece of work that goes for, you know, that there's a buyer for 10,000 dollars. They sell 6 pieces of work and its like, "You got your money for the year!", you know? That's a good living.

Abdelhadi: Yeah.

Okamoto: You know, and it gives them resource to to produce more, you know? So...

Abdelhadi: Yeah, was there anything else you wanted to talk about? Anything you're excited about? Any memories that you feel like are really important to you?

Okamoto: Um, there are so many um...But I-I just feel like...I-I feel like it's really important to say that like none of this is from nothing. That there were many, many um... What do they say about, about "Kopernick?". How do you say his name?

Abdelhadi: Kaepernick.

Okamoto: On the backs of giants.

Abdelhadi: Oh.

Okamoto: There were giants before us, you know, and that like...You know? Even people we don't think, like Grace Jones. Really important to trans community, you know? Bambi Lake, you know?

Who... Justin Bond, Justine Bond uses her music...I don't even know if she compensates Bambi, but I know Bambi, and she was homeless forever and she was a Cockette.

Abdelhadi: Wow.

Okamoto: I think all these names...I'm trying so hard to pool all these names because when somebody listens to this, I want those- I want them to hear those names. It's good to hear my story, but those were all the players that made life, you know, that opened doors, shut doors, or made it very clear that doors were shut, or, you know, activism had to happen... So, so I'm grateful and I think...Yeah, I'll see—I'm—I'm constant in my um... my work in the trans community and I'm expanding that and integrating that, and that Venn diagram of life, you know?

Abdelhadi: That's awesome.

Okamoto: Yeah.

Abdelhadi: Thank you so much for doing this with me.

Okamoto: Thank you.

Abdelhadi: Yeah, thanks.