NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

GAVILÁN RAYNA RUSSOM

Interviewer: Aviva Silverman

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Transcribed by: Ciaran McAree

NYC TOHP Interview #237

Aviva Silverman: Hello, my name is Aviva Silverman, and I will be having a conversation with Gavilán Rayna Rossum for the New York City Trans Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is August 12, 2024, and it's being recorded in Ridgewood. Hello.

Gavilán Rayna Rossum: Hi.

Silverman: How's it going?

Rossum: It's going all right.

Silverman: You just told me I should call you Rayna.

Rossum: So yeah, it's either full name Gavilán Rayna Rossum, or Rayna for short.
So I use my middle name like most people use their first name, but it's never Rayna Rossum or Gavilan.

Silverman: Got you.

Rossum: Just the three of them.

Silverman: And would you want to tell me more about those names?

Rossum: Yeah. I chose those names over a few year period. I first came out when I was three years old to my parents, and I told them my name was Tina. And they were like, where's our son? And I was like, you don't have a son. And throughout my life of like...

Silverman: Could you just tell us where you were?

Rossum: Yeah. So I was born in 1974 in Providence, Rhode Island. And I grew up on the east side of Providence. And until I was four, I lived in an apartment on 6th Street, and then moved to a house on the corner of Summit Avenue and Colonial Road. I think I was in the basement when this happened Um…Yeah And so, you know, throughout my life, the many times that I kind of like approach transitioning in various ways, which I'll definitely talk about… Yeah, so I had it in my mind, like, would I use that name? And then I came to the point of wanting to change my name I didn't really feel like my birth name was super gendered. So there was a period of time where I was like, I feel all right with that. But my middle name, I really didn't ever like my middle name. It felt very gendered. So I started by changing the middle name to Rayna, um… and using my birth name um…, like usually together first and middle name. So there's a period of time, like also in my public presence and interviews, and I think at least one piece of music that I released where it's Gavin Rayna Rossum. Um… I also made the decision that, like, my dead name was going to exist in the world attached to the things that I'd done during that time and just like, consider that it's like an alias that I used for a while. I've used a lot of other aliases

[Laughter] artistically. Um… so yeah, so Tina, I anyway, so I thought I didn't really like Tina, I didn't feel like it fit me. But I want to do something that referred to it, as also like, trying to kind of keep within a family naming convention that includes this thing of using the middle name as the first name, but also includes like a GRR initial. Anyway, so I had a grandfather named Ray, who passed, actually, his middle name was Ray, but that's what everyone knew him by, because that's how you do it. So I put Ray and Tina together, and I got Rayna, and I thought I made it up I mean, I knew that, I mean, I speak Spanish, so I knew that *reina* in Spanish means queen, but it's spelled R-E-I-N-A so I thought I made this spelling up. And then I learned that it is actually a name that other people [laughter], that other people have. And then Gavilán came later. I, there was a point where like using, well, there's a couple of things. I, like, wanted to have like a professional name that was different than like my government name. Um.. and then like using my dead name, I just got, like, didn't work anymore. I was like, no, I'm going to do it.[cough] And I was in Brazil on a vacation, and I was in this place where there were like a lot of birds of prey circling all the time, it was a beautiful beach, but there were also like tons of birds of prey. It's kind of an amazing thing, it's kind of a southern hemisphere thing. I haven't seen that much here, maybe in California a little bit. Um.. and I was reading “Society of the Dead” by Todd Ramón Ochoa, and yeah, it came together in my mind that “Gavilán” is hawk in Spanish, and my dead name, “Gavin”, is hawk in Welsh, and that they're spelled similarly and probably have connections through the like Celtic migrations through Basque, through Spain, Galicia. And like a lot of things came together etymologically around that, but also that like changing it to Gavilán meant dropping like a female pronoun into the middle of my dead name, which I also [Laughter] liked. And then… [Background noise] yeah, and also like the association….

Silverman: Let’s just pause this one sec sorry.

Rossum: Okay, cool.

[Background noise]

Rossum: Okay. All right, so there's a lot of things that go into this name, but the association with hawks, especially birds of prey, was important to me spiritually. It connected with like, what Todd Ramón Ochoa talks about in Society of the Dead, which is…[unintelligible] which is a part of my story, which I'll probably also talk about. Um.. and in the-in the book, there's a song that Todd Ramón Ochoa transcribed that says like, at midnight, the hawk flew. Doce de noche en Gavilan [unintelligible] in like Cuban-Kikongo. So anyway, I was there at this important time in my life, and there was like hawks circling, and I was reading the book, and I was having a lot of spiritual experiences, and so that all kind of felt like it fell together, and I emerged from that trip and changed my name. Um…so that's where it came from. [Laughter]

Silverman: Yeah.

[Laughter]

Silverman: And how was Providence growing up?

Russom: I mean, a lot… complicated, I uhh… I mean, I have come to really think of Providence as a special place in certain ways, I've done a lot of like writing about it. Um.. but growing up there, it felt like very small in a lot of ways, too. Like a combination of very big and very small like I think something really cool about growing up in Providence is that I went to public school until I was in 11th grade, and Uh.., I just like was always around a lot of people whose backgrounds were very different than mine, like culturally, religiously. Uh… and I think that had to do with Providence being this odd combination of a place that really is a city and really has like everything that a much bigger city would have, but is so small that all those things are very like crammed together. Um.. and yeah, it's, you know, like my first grade class, I was like hearing at least like seven different languages. And, you know, there was always a thing of like, oh, well, we're going to do this activity, but this student has to do it differently because they have a religious background that doesn't like permit it. Or you know, it was always this thing of like really understanding like, okay, that there's like, there's people in the world who are very different than me. And I felt like that was a real privilege um.. and it also felt really small. It was also like, it was also kind of like, I've come to understand it because it was normalized for me growing up there. That it was kind of a scary place since it was in the 80s. Um… There was a lot of um… organized crime and like um… that sort of is like how the city was run, it's through organized crime um… And I mean, some of that led to these like sort of special qualities of having this sort of like very lawless sense of like a lot of like sort of unsupervised spaces and kind of like a lot of unpredictability about how like laws worked. [Laughter] Um… but it also led to other kinds of unpredictability that was scary and there were contract killings in my neighborhood as a child. And that was like something I only later realized was like unusual, you know? And definitely was very, very frightening, actually, like very, very frightening to grow up around. Um… it was just an incredibly tense time like in the 80s, the city was very, very um… kind of like economically spare. Um… And so, yeah, I think there was always also that thing like I grew up around a lot of violence. I think I was also identified as some kind of like, you know, there was something different about me. So I experienced a lot of violence. You know, and also I think, I mean, on the other side of that, like found ways to like, yeah, just like get through the world, you know, get through a really kind of scary version of the world as a, you know, as a kind of visibly queer and gender nonconforming person, I was like gendered as female a lot when I was a child um… so it was complicated, but also like, I think there was a lot of really interesting artistic culture. Especially as I started to get older, just a lot of like underground music culture that was like sort of very accessible, again, because of like the size of the city. And, um… you know, I started like, I mean, I think I started skateboarding when I was like pretty young and there was lots of like, you know, tons of closed businesses around where I lived and just big empty parking lots. Like, and just a lot of just like people, you know, building a skate ramp or like turning something into a venue. Um… so there was a sort of sense of like possibility too, like a kind of combination of like um… I think a real lack of like permission and possibility, especially in my family um… And in terms of like a sort of like an economic view, like there was no sense that there was like, like growing up in Providence for me, there was like no sense that there was like anywhere to kind of like get to or go to in life that it was just kind of like make the best of um…

So it was a combination of things. Cause like within that sort of frame of like, just kind of make the best of what's happening, it was possible to do a lot of stuff. And I got involved in like um… underground music venues, I think by the time I was maybe like 14 years old um… and mostly in the punk hardcore scene, but also a little bit in like electronic, like a kind of emerging electronic music scenes and hip hop scene and stuff. And I was like, you know, like a kind of emerging electronic music scenes and hip hop scene and stuff. But a lot of that stuff, like I've only understand and reflecting on it and I think most of my experience growing up was like, I got to get out of here. Like for a variety of reasons, some of which were like very obvious of like, I'm experiencing violence like on a daily basis and I just need to not have that happen. But also um… yeah, I just felt like there, you know, there must be another world and I got really into like, you know, particularly like late night television when I was a kid, really young kid. Like, I think it was kind of the safe, like the safe place for me was like when everybody went to sleep um… and it just like be in the basement, like watching TV. And I got, I saw like so many amazing things because late night TV, especially in the eighties, it's just really like…

Silverman: Are there's certain shows you remember?

Russom: I mean, I mean, some things uh… like, like Benny Hill Show, like being able to watch Benny Hill Show and just being like, they're talking about sex and just being like, wow, like nobody's talking about sex in my house, you know? But Glow, Glow was really big for me. I think it was maybe early nineties, but Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling, it was great. I also saw a lot of like, yeah, I saw a lot of kind of like um… art movies on PBS. I mean, the one I remember is "Made in Britain", but I saw tons of other movies that I didn't even know what they are that just were like, there's this other world that exists. There were also like, "The Party Machine with Nia Peeples" was super huge for me because it was like, it was in a, you know, I mean, it was like a dance show and it was like in a fake club and it was like all gears and stuff because it was supposed to be "The Party Machine". And, you know, a lot of like artists that I really liked like performed on it and like, you know, it definitely seeded this thing of like, oh, there's a world, there's another world out there that's like very different than what I'm experiencing. Um… I think those were a few of the big ones, but it was just the vibe of late… I mean, also like Silk Stockings is like a weird, like slightly erotic detective show. Just a vibe of late night. Like I, it just like, I was, you know, I was like a nightlife person from probably like a super young age. I was drawn to like, yeah, the sort of like vibe of how sort of like things shift late at night and like different sets of roles apply.

Silverman: Um… Did you, were you brought up with religion?

Russom: I was really not brought up with religion, but so my, on both sides of my family, like going back just like one or two generations, people are very, very, very religious, which is not unusual. I think it's just kind of like an older time thing, but yeah, my mom's, yeah, so my mom's great grandparents on one side were Anabaptists, mostly in the Church of the Brethren and also the Mennonite Church and then on the other side, Catholics and on both of those, they were very like fervently religious people. than my dad's family some of them converted to

the Church of the Brethren, actually, which is like a odd thing, but we're just mostly like very, very evangelical Protestants. I'm like, you know, really into that. Um so yeah, it was interesting. I think I grew up with a lot of the sort of like um… punitive frameworks of those religions, but without the sort of ritual and like the sort of structure. So, it was kind of like this holdover. I think like my parents, my parents both had like pursued kind of academic paths. My dad was a professor and my mom did a lot of different stuff um… Yeah, a lot of different stuff, like archiving stuff. She also was like involved in like building the data systems and that became like spell check and grammar check, just languages. Like both my parents are linguists. Um.. So, they very much had a kind of uh… yeah, like secular humanist, I guess, vibe. But yeah, I think underlying it was this sort of deep sense of kind of both sort of some kind of spiritual connection, but also this sort of like very, very punitive idea about how the world works, which I think a lot of people in the US have too, just absorbing like the multiple [laughter] legacies of this country. But I was very drawn to religion from a really young age I think, I mean, I think I always experienced the world as a very magical place. I think part of that has to do with that. I just really felt I was just so isolated as a child and I really had no ability to form community with other people or connect with other people. I mean, even in underground music scenes, it just felt like absolutely on the outside looking in in every possible way. But especially as a younger child, it just was not, there just, I had no sense of fitting in anywhere at all. I didn't know queer people. I didn't know trans people. I didn't understand my own relationship to those things. I didn't even understand that those things existed. I just, you know, couldn't connect. I think, you know, my family did not understand me or understand how to deal with anything that was going on for me. I was like a very like scapegoated child. You know, I was, you know, from a very young age was like the really bad, you know, the bad one. And yeah, like got into drugs and drinking. I mean, I think partly because I felt like those were also kind of magical things at a pretty young age. But I spent a lot of time alone and I think, um… yeah, I mean, again, there's a lot of things that I understand retroactively, but like, you know, I currently, part of what I do is I work as a medium and I give readings and I work through a lot of healing arts modalities that in one way or another connect to mediumship. And yeah, I sort of like understand retroactively that I was also like having experiences connected to that as a young child that also sort of made the world seem, I mean, both very scary, but also kind of magical. And that it seemed that like, that was part of why people became religious is because of that. Like, but then it was a very conflicted thing for like me with morality and like homophobia and like, you know, I mean, yeah, there were like, especially in the 80s, like, you know, like street preachers in Providence. And I remember like one of them, like delivering this like homophobic rant and just like, you know, like correcting him using other parts of the Bible, you know, like, and yeah, so I think my relationship to religion was complex, but I always had a longing, I think for some kind of spiritual connection and not just like personal spiritual experience, but some kind of frameworks that might help hold that. So, and I think increasingly as I got older, I started encountering a lot of difficulties in my life, especially just related to like trying to untangle like my own like trans dyke experience and where I fit in the world and how, you know, like, and why I, just like all the tensions around that. And yeah, I think there was something about religion that felt like it spoke to that. And maybe it was this, I think maybe initially, maybe some kind of like transcendence, like an idea of like transcending the body, which I also was like experiencing through the arts, through like music

especially, but also through like all kinds of like visual arts and stuff like experiencing, you know, as a young person, like discovering kind of like experimental music and like feeling like, oh, this is somehow like feeling like I get to have some presence that's beyond my body. And there's something like that, but then I think like in my mid-teens, probably, I started to get introduced to Santería and through a couple of different channels, but I think primary one was like a high school friend of mine who had moved to New York after high school and got initiated. And then that sort of, I think shifted for me from this thing of like transcending the body to something that was much more embodied and that within those sort of like modalities, which I, you know, like at this point in my life as a 50 years old, I've been not just like part of, but like initiated into and a knowledge keeper of for quite a long time now. But I think back then, yeah, there was this sense of a shift away from like a kind of a transcendent idea about bodies and gender and sexuality to something that was like, that the kind of complexity and fluidity that I was experiencing can be embodied, you know, and like in terms of things like co-presence or possession where there's like, you know, a person who has a body that presents in one way, but like hold space for a spiritual entity that like causes that body to present in a really different way. I think that was a starting point for me. That was like, that these spiritual practices and modalities and traditions are holding space for gender expansiveness in a way that like other things aren't. And I think, I think I became, you know, in a lot of ways I became a very religious person because of that within those contexts. And yeah, um… and I think it's still like a lot of my understanding of myself as a trans person and what that means to me and sort of how I move through the world and also think and talk about transness and also like through Voluminous Arts, like hopefully create spaces for like complex and, you know, evolving notions of transness, like come from a sort of rooting in my experiences in those spaces and Afro-Latinx spiritual spaces, rather than from a kind of queer theory or like sort of U.S. identity-based relationship to transness. You know, I think for me, it's, um…[pause] it's my experiences in those spaces that allowed me to sort of like own my own trans identity. And that wasn't possible when I was sort of like trying to be just in kind of queer social space of a more kind of like, white, for lack of a better word, like kind.

Silverman: And is your relationship to your spiritual practice more individual or do you have a community?

Russom: I have a number of communities now and I've had a number of communities over time. I think, you know, like I think the first communities that I connected with were here in New York. I moved to New York in 1997, in January of 1997. And I really had no, um… [pause] I don't know, it's not like I had no idea what I was doing because I think I had like a sort of pretty strong interconnection to a lot of different things, a lot of different interests. But I moved to New York mostly because I had, I went to Bard College for three years and I had mostly been in a music program there called Music Program Zero that was phased out during the time that I was there for a lot of different reasons. So, and it was a, it was kind of interesting program and it was problematic in a lot of ways as part of why it got phased out. But I, I was drawn to that program because it had this sort of interdisciplinary nature. It was kind of experimental and also kind of like, yeah, it was, it was, it was kind of like yeah, it seemed to be sort of dedicated to

creative practices that like invented themselves rather than like plugged into a preexisting model. And that was something that had become really important to me, I think, especially coming out of kind of like, yeah, improvising music and, and which is something I got interested in in high school. But anyway, so I was in this program, which was sort of like, it was kind of like feminist music theory, interdisciplinary arts, improvisation, you know, sort of like radical composition. It was a lot of different things and partly it was also like something where I kind of was able to create my own thing. So I was, I became interested in this idea of like, a particular kind of maybe installation art that was about like creating spaces and sounds to exist in those spaces and how like sound and place connect with each other and I was excited about that work and then the program sort of imploded and I got shifted over to the art department in my last semester because I did not have a lot of the sort of, I don't know, qualities isn't the right word, but skills, maybe. I didn't have a lot of the skills that were sort of like basics for the music department at that time. I didn't use notation. It was something I'd never really been interested in. Didn't have a background in a lot of like sort of conventional Western music theory because I was coming from kind of like playing in noise bands in Providence and like DJing. And I had played cello when I was a kid. So I sort of like understand, understood Western musical notation stuff, but it was, it never sort of was like quantified my ideas about music. So I definitely didn't fit in in the music department and they honestly, Bard was just trying to avoid a scandal. So they were like, we got to find a place for her because if this blows up, it's gonna reflect badly on us. So they popped me into the art department, which was also partly my choice. I mean, I was like, of the things that make sense, I think this makes sense. And I got to just get this theory done and get out of here. So I, yeah, so Amy Selman, who's a painter and now a friend was on faculty and was just starting that year. And I did have my classes with her, but for some reason she just took a liking to me and we would come into my studio and hang out. And at the time, I mean, it's sort of the time that I first like really kind of like came out towards the last year of college. I played in this band called La Mala Diablo, like the devil's hand and like performed in quote, unquote, like drag, but like also didn't stop wearing that drag when we were not performing. And yeah, I found out later that at that time I had a girlfriend who was like a bi woman. And I think like, you know, later on, she was like, I really wanted you to be my boyfriend, but it was really clear that you were my girlfriend. [Laughter] And it was kind of amazing. Like it was a kind of, I mean, I was drinking a lot. It was kind of the only way I could kind of like feel like comfortable in my gender presentation was to drink a lot. Um… But it was also kind of an amazing time because I was sort of experiencing the ability to kind of live this gender expansiveness in the world a little bit. Definitely through performance, but also just how performance was extending into my daily life, like, or elements of like what I was exploring in performance and, you know, like sort of ritualized things like a band playing or whatever or being at a party. It's like with, through those kinds of performance, I was like learning things about my body and what felt better for my body in terms of like how I carried myself and what I wore. And then those things started like informing my daily life. And it's a big part of like, Voluminous Arts it's a big part of the sort of like mission founding principle of Voluminous Arts is that idea. And yeah, I later found out that that girlfriend was like, yeah, told me that I had started taking her birth control pills to get hormones, which I actually, I'm pretty sure I didn't learn was the thing you could do until some years later. Like, I think I just intuitively figured it

out, which is kind of a wild thing. Like, as a blackout drinker, without any information, I was like, I still, like, think that's what I need. And she was like, yeah, I really need them. You were taking them and you told me you needed them more than I did. Which was very validating in a lot of ways, even though it's like, it shouldn't have to be like that. But it was really interesting to be like, wow, I knew, I knew what I needed. Even under some dire circumstances. But, and so, yeah, Amy Solman had, like, just took a liking to me and, like, came and hung out in my studio. And mostly what I was doing in my studio was, like, making dresses to either wear in my band or just, like, cause. I just was obsessively making dresses. My mom taught me how to sew when I was a kid and, like, I don't know. I couldn't figure out what I was doing. And eventually, like, for my final project, I just, like, made it, I created the illusion that my studio had burned down. Cause it was like, I couldn't really think of what else to do except something that just was destructive. And if I could have actually just burned down my studio, I would have, but I couldn't do it. But she was, she took a, she took an interest in me and particularly in what I was going to do after I graduated. And so she, and I really did not know, I had no idea what I was going to do and I probably would have ended up back in Providence and probably would not have been really good for me. So she connected me with a friend of hers who was subletting her apartment on 5th Avenue between 31st, sorry, 31st between 5th Avenue and 6th Avenue, or 5th and Broadway. And I had a high school friend who worked at Angelica Kitchen, this macrobiotic restaurant, on 12th. Amy's boyfriend was also, like, hiring somebody to help install an art show. So I kind of had this little landing pad in New York of this four-month sublet and a couple jobs. And the sublet was amazing. I mean, I lived in it by myself. It was $400 a month. There was like a painting studio in the thing. It was incredible. There was a Buddhist temple on the floor below me and a dungeon on the floor above me. And yeah, and I mean, just like, I mean, so many things changed for me when I moved to New York. It was just like the sort of expansiveness of a sense of possibility was pretty huge. And also to have done that sort of in this point where I was sort of, like, in some way transitioning, I mean, it did not have, like, the support, I didn't have the information, didn't really have the community. But um… I just was, like, around so many things that really spoke to me. Culturally, like music and trying to find my way and also, like, find, you know, find jobs. I mean, just like, just like tumultuous time of, like, but like so much learning and being exposed to so many new things. And I think especially kind of like, you know, coming from having kind of been out of, like, city environments for a while. It was like, for my last two years of high school, I went to this arts boarding school in Massachusetts. So that was very much like a very strange culture shock experience of being in a kind of cloistered environment. And then I'd gone to, I went to School Art Institute of Chicago for one year. But then I went to Bard's. It was like I'd been sort of also out of that kind of environment for a while. So it was, I think, a combination of also like some things that felt familiar to me from growing up in Providence, but then like on this huger scale in New York and just like massive. And I really, really loved that. And then when the sublet was done, I moved to Williamsburg and I lived in like kind of unfurnished loft on the corner of Metropolitan and Roebling. And Williamsburg at the time was really full of a lot of people who practiced Santería and other sort of traditions connected to it. There were botanicas pretty much everywhere. And there were a lot of sort of other places that were, you know, like temple places, like places where people went to practice together. It was a lot, it was a lot, a lot, a lot. And there was a,

well, there was a *botánica* in the building that I moved into after that place. And so I think my first community around those spiritualities was just like the people that worked in *botánicas* and kind of like worked in these, you know, like ran these, it was essentially like a spiritual community space. And yeah, I was hung out in *botánicas* a lot, like asking questions and probably being annoying. And so that was kind of the first iteration of a community around that. And then, yeah, I've had various different spiritual communities. I lived in Berlin from 2004 to 2009, although I did for most of that time still maintain pretty strong connections to New York and had an apartment here as well for some of that time. So in Berlin, similarly, like there was, like, I don't know, it is weird how in my experience, like those spiritualities have like really popped up for me, even in very unusual places. Like I lived in Neukölln in Berlin, I think, in maybe like 2005. And there was a botánica there that was more of a Brazilian one, but it was still like, there was this woman who was running a botánica in Neukölln. And I'd just like go hang out with her and ask her questions and stuff. And then I met Kit Danowski, who is a, uh.. [pause] yeah, a playwright and theorist and artist and poet who actually passed away just a week or so ago.

Silverman: I'm so sorry.

Russom: Yeah, thanks. And Kit became, yeah, Kit was, went to Transart, and Transart at that time was in Berlin. And so Kit became my first godparent in Santería. And also a mentor in a lot of different ways. You know, Kit, like became for me, like, you know, a person who like, saw the value of the work that I was doing in a way that nobody else had. And helped me to kind of like, value it myself. I mean, still a work in progress, I have to say, but they're certainly still helping me with that. But yeah, so I met Kit on the street in Berlin. And at that time, so as I think is somewhat widely known, but I'll just explain it because it's not like universally known, like, there are a number of inter initiation somebody goes through in Santería. And one of them is a quite large one where the Orichá, which is a spiritual entity, connected to like places in nature and stories and histories and particular frequencies of energy is like placed in the person's head. And after that ceremony, the initiate wears white for a year and seven days. And it's called *iyawó*, *iyawó* means like “bride of the Orichá”. So it's the period and during which you are that. And so it was Kit's *iyawó*. So I had, you know, I'd known a lot about Santeria and had been connected with it through a whole bunch of different, a whole bunch of ways. So I was, I knew that this is what happened. And I, yeah, I ran into Kit on the street and I was leaving the place that Z was arriving at. So there was this sort of point of contact where I was like, I can talk to this person. And I was like, are you
doing that thing? And then, yeah. So then, yeah, Kit became my first godparent and gave me my first couple of initiations and then introduced me to their spiritual community, which was mostly in San Diego, California. And so I did a lot of ceremony in that community, which was like a kind of queer Santeria house. And then in 2018, I went to Cuba with Ned Sublette, who's like a music historian and writer. And I think it's just started again, but stopped for a while for the pandemic, but was doing these seminars, music-based seminars in Cuba. I met Ned because Ned was part of a group of people that were like in Arthur Russell's circles in the seventies. And I got invited to kind of contribute like sort of updated electronic element to Arthur Russell's

piece Instrumentals for like a tour that these folks were doing, like Peter Gordon, Peter Zummo, Reese Chatham, Bill Rule, and Ned Sublette. And Ned walked into the first rehearsal with like the beads, the Santeria beads on. So I was like, well, what's your story. And we got talking. And so I ended up going on this music seminar with Ned and then going to Cuba pretty frequently. I'd been once in '99, my partner of like almost 10 years, Della Gonzalez, a Cuban American. And we made a lot of music and art together. And I went to Cuba with her in '99 and I had quite a profound experience, but I didn't have really like a pathway to go back until these music seminars came up. And so, yeah, around 2018, I started to work with a kind of spiritual and artistic community in central, west central Cuba. That is now kind of my main community, but I also have godchildren and, you know, I do have like a growing community in New York and kind of internationally too, just like people I've met over the years. So that is kind of what my community looks like. And I also got to tell you a lot of my life story, just answering that one question.

Silverman: Yea that's perfect. I was wondering, what other communities you're a part of?

Russom: Yeah. I mean, it's something that I found myself like
thinking a lot about and saying in a lot of interviews at a certain point that like,
I think possibly because, yeah, possibly because like my cultural background is like a white person. Maybe just particularities I think of my family or just kind of like, just a general kind of individualistic way that capitalism works in the United States. I think I didn't come to community kind of naturally. I really had to like, really like undo a lot of like the ways that I had been trained to think to kind of understand, like first of all, just like the value of community and also like how to actually be in community with other people. But I think the first like sense, the first sense of communities that I probably had were, were music communities. I think for me, I mean, I had a, I, so I, I had this experience with hormones, which is that first, I was very scared to start taking hormones. And it was very helpful to like be around other trans women and like hear their experiences and stuff and like develop a kind of gentle approach to it myself. And I'm very grateful that they exist and that I'm on them. But when I started hormones, I really, it was this sense that I could like, that I could express myself in language for the first time in my life, both written and spoken language. You know, I was like, before that it was like, there was like, I was, I knew who I was and was, had to, had like a sense of who I was and what I wanted to say and what I wanted to do in the world. But it was like buried in like 10 layers deep and that the other layers were these sort of like strange translations of like how, you know, information from the world would get translated to me and I would translate it back. And so I had this profound experience that when I started taking hormones, it's like that sort of layering just like sort of dissolved. And I found that I could just talk like I was the first, you know, I was 42 when I started hormones and I was like, I could talk and maybe I had had some, yeah, maybe during that time that I was talking about like where I was taking my girlfriend's birth control pills, maybe I had some experiences like that or had sort of fleeting moments of that. But it was in this very abiding way. I was like, oh, I can actually talk and express myself. And yeah, but before that music was really like how I interacted with the world and kind of all of my social connections and were around music. So I think that those were the first communities that I was involved

with and those like extended beyond like actually playing music with people. But I think that was this core thing. But, you know, I think, you know, growing up in Providence, you know, it was like I connected with people around like, oh, we listen to music that's like not on the radio, you know, we listen to like punk. I mean, at the time, you know, the late 80s, I guess it was the world was a bit different. But, you know, at the time it was like listening to punk music. We listened to like techno and like acid and hip hop. And like this, none of those things were really like on mainstream radio, at least.

And they weren't, you know, when like, I mean, to some degree, hip hop was already taking off, but still it was like you know like you went to a hip-hop concert it was not in a stadium you know unless it was like I don't know Run DMC or something but um yeah so it was like if I wanted to see live music I saw it in small places sometimes and like just you know illegal venues where somebody had like taken over some part of an industrial building you know and like listen to music that was not on the radio or at least mainstream radio so like my social life kind of got organized around that and community got organized around that and I think like yeah it's interesting I mean it counters what I was saying before but like I think growing up in Providence there was this sort of strong sense of a kind of like porous underground community of people who just like you know we're across a pretty broad spectrum of like what they were into but did kind of connect through the just sense that like we weren't doing what was on like was represented on television that's like sort of like what life is like and I mean I yeah I gravitated towards that I really just like you know as soon as I kind of like got like on the thread of it just spent a lot of time just like hanging out I mean going to clubs and shows especially like afternoon like hardcore shows and stuff but also just like hanging out you know like just hanging out and now but there was always like around music somehow I think like music was like the glue that like held that together so I think that was for a long time was like music communities and yeah I mean I think the you know the thing that was always challenging for me is that like that there was yeah there was a gender problem there was like a gender and a queerness problem in those scenes and it was like as I was trying to figure myself out it was like you know this sort of like well do I yeah like how do I perform masculinity if I'm supposed to be like a boy or a man in these scenes and like I just couldn't I don't know I mean I couldn't figure it out and it was all just like performance art and drag for me I think I'm just like oh okay cool this is how people dress so I'll like put this like look together and so I think like yeah it's interesting to think of it as a community I mean like in certain sense it wasn't it was for people but again it was a community in which I just like didn't actually ever really I think really authentically find my place I mean in and out it's not like a binary there but um yeah I think in New York I you know I think that that that expanded I think just because New York is expansive to like other kinds of artistic communities especially around performance art I mean I think I got you know as soon as I moved to New York it was like a few dots connected around sort of like always being drawn to a kind of like I guess what like people call like an academia like a camp aesthetic and kind of like just like a performance that is like bad [laughter] bad like inappropriate and you know I think those are the first things that I did in New York were sort of like you know various kinds of like performance that also included music and was part of a community of people I think I kind of a short-lived community of people who were doing kind of that kind of performance.

Silverman: Were there certain clubs or theaters or places where you…

Russom: I mean The Cooler especially the free Monday nights on The Cooler was like a big thing for me I mean partly because it was free.

Silverman: And where was that located?

Russom: It's on 14th between 9th and 10th I think but that was the other thing it was like in the meatpacking district and it was in the packing district during a time when I was like a lot of like trans specific sex work happening I mean back in district so it was also like it was like I could be in that area even though I hadn't you know like I didn't have the knowledge of myself to be in that community like I you know it was like it was there was a lot of things that drew me there was free it was usually sort of like experimental music it was also like there's kind of like a very like 90s thing happening of like electronic music culture and like avant-garde you know experimental music culture coming together and noise and and but then also like in this context that was like this you know this context were like the main context of the neighborhood was like trans sex work and trans sex work organizing that was a big one for me also like by the time I moved to Williamsburg there were a lot of just like parties like a lot of house parties also like Ruby [unintelligible] the original Ruby [unintelligible] that was on South 6th Street was like a big spot where a lot of like those kind of things were happening I did parties there and performed there are a lot and I even had a studio there for a while I think. Um… I don't remember the late 90's well [laughter]. What else… I mean there was also like there was like the big clubs like Tunnel and Twyla which like I don't know it was just like it wasn't my scene but like to go there was kind of amazing because of like the spectacularness of it there was also this like sound lab this like sound lab series which was like kind of came out of the jungle scene but was also like very experimental and they did just like raves Liquid Sky, Storm Rave, like a lot of that stuff I was also like I could never kind of be comfortable like fitting into like one scene especially after kind of those younger experiences of like you know just being like okay well from the hardcore scene then I have to like get all the little things and look right and like and just finding like that that like like hurt at a certain point I was like by the time I was in my mid-teens I was like it really hurts to like flatten myself into this one identity yeah and then you know New York I mean I was just in my early 20s but um… [pause] you know so still like forming my identity but I still just this thing of like kind of like just being in one scene or something just it felt weird to me so I really bopped around a lot and went to a lot of different things and mostly like went out by myself um… or just like you know and then like I said I had a partner for a long time you know went to stuff with her but it was a different time in my life [mumbling] like I don't love to talk about that time in my life but even though like there's a lot of formative things there but it's kind of like I mean I guess in some ways what I think of is that I de-transitioned during that time in my life because I had sort of like come out into at least some sense of gender expansiveness in my early 20s that I was living in the world and sharing with other people and then you know a few a few things happened I think one of which is like I got assaulted really badly in a way that was like very specifically targeted that gender presentation and it didn't understand it until later but that like shortly after that you know like I met somebody who had I think some like you know had very

traditional values in the way that she dated and sort of like you know just tried to form myself into that person and sort of like detransitioned in a lot of ways so you know but you know it's it's complicated I mean it's probably beyond the [laughter] scope of this this interview but anyway we're talking about communities uh…

Silverman: I think its very much in the scope of this interview… [unintelligible]

[laughter]

Russom: Yeah I mean yes but uh yeah um yeah I mean and to some degree like you know like that was my community for a long time too was like you know Delia the person I was dating and then you know our friend Christian Halstead we did a number of like performance projects together like mime, black leotard front, where you know and we were yeah maybe small like little artistic community of three people sometimes brought other people and and I think we're we're in I think in a lot of ways we're also just connected about around like being like very troubled and scared about like the direction the world was moving in especially like you know W Bush presidency like when that stuff started to unfold like being really I think you know a lot of like you see it in the black leotard front work a lot of just like rage around a sense of powerlessness about like the world just moving into this very very um… sinister direction um… [pause] and a lot of fear around that and I'll sort of like maybe a hopeful desire to like somehow making like just like unhinged artwork could like address that and you know and balancing that with also like I think trying to have careers in the arts and I think you know it's it's complicated and you know I think like my experience too was it's like I also experienced like my own inability to like repress my femininity and my transness and again sort of like performance becoming a way that those things got expressed and I mean I think you know it's like it's a theme for me like Lana Liliablo, black leotard front, black meteoric star these are like three projects where like I used performance as a way to like inhabit my gender identity when I couldn't do it in my daily life but that also like provided these stepping stones to doing that in my daily life. I mean you know today in terms of community like I'm really involved in building community through Voluminous Arts…

Silverman: Do you want to describe what that is?

Russom: Yes it is an organization I founded in 2020 it started as it started from this idea to have like a record label that would work different than the record labels that I've experienced working with not so much as like a critique of them but just from an understanding that like by that point in my life of 2020 I was 46 that I had come to understand that like my relationship to music was like passionate and engaged but just did not fit within the rubrics of like the music industry and that included things like that my relationship to music also always had was interdisciplinary but also things around just like how genre kind of flattens things into these categories and how demands are placed on artists to kind of change what they're doing and also like individualize and professionalize it's a lot of stuff and again mostly came out of me being angry and because you know I think the place where I have been most known as a like in

terms of my professional life is in the music world that like starting a record label seemed like the most kind of legible way to make this move in the direction of of building a community organization and so for Voluminous Arts began as a record label and was the idea that I would like put out some of my own music to kind of like broadcast what it was about and then start to work with other artists who kind of responded to that what was kind of shared through like me releasing not just new music but also like archival music a lot of different a lot of different music that I'd made over the years and also as a way to just fund it to be like people will buy my music so you know it's a way to start and I think at the time I was only partially aware that that there was a real connection from between this idea of like resisting fixed categorization in terms of musical performance or recording and like trans experience so initially you know I I wanted for Voluminous Arts to be like a trans centered project but it didn't think of it as like I didn't consider that I might only be working with trans people but then that is what happened and then as I started to understand the project better I started to understand why it is important for it to be you know a project by and for trans people that also includes other people in various ways but that is like actually about the connections between experimental artists to culture and trans experience and like have at this point like been able to like put that into a little package of that like because trans people often like uncover aspects of our identities through experimental practices and like the two that I think are most legible for people is like putting on a dress for the first time or like adopting a different name or a shortened version of a name that like changes the gendering of one's name you know like those are experiments and people often encounter embodied experiences
is through those experiments that like help them understand themselves better. That's my experience that that creates a connection between like experimental art has a specific kind of resonance and purpose in the lives of some trans people and that Voluminous Arts is a space for that. And yeah, over the so it's 2020 actually was founded in March of 2020, two days, March 10th, 2020 launched two days later, like the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 global pandemic and things started to close, which I wouldn't say like changed the mission, but it definitely inflected in certain ways. I mean, partly just because it was like, we're not going to be throwing parties in New York like I thought we were but also I think this remarkable thing happened in the underground music scene in New York, also because, you know, COVID affected New York differently than the rest of the country for a while, because how much we like live with each other and amongst each other in ways where like places where people drive more, it's not the same. But yeah, I just watched a lot of the kind of like underground music scenes that I had been connected with, like transform almost overnight into like mutual aid networks, and, you know, PPE distribution places, protest support, you know, it was like wild to see how quickly folks who like whose skill set was kind of like built up around throwing parties were able to just shift and be like, Oh, and we can do this too, because it's the same set of, it's the same set of procedures, you know. And so it was, you know, it was sort of like, having established this organization, I also thought, well, I want this organization to be something that could like, nurture and hold space for this very important thing, especially the next time something like that comes around. So it's also what I've built toward really built towards. Yeah, and I mean, some of the things I'm really proud of, like in 2020, in 2021, we did a virtual conference on nightlife that brought together people, nightlife workers, artists,

organizers to just kind of talk about the value of what can happen in the kind of pause that we had when venues were closed. And also used like, some fundraising to like, get people who had lost work because of club closures, like honoraria through the for their participation. And I think that was like a pretty vital, like organizing thing. It was a vital experience for me, obviously. But you know, I think people were able to kind of come together and have these very, very special kind of conversations that were able to happen during that time. And, yeah, we, we had a physical space for a few years. And we're able to hold programs like Synthesizer Coworking, DJ Access, which like brought trans people together in community with each other around like learning how to use some basic equipment for electronic music. And did a summer residency program at Center for Art Research and Alliances, which like, brought six trans artists into residency and like did a curatorial project based around the Free Cooler Monday nights, like reimagining that if it was more connected to the sex work communities that it was in the middle of. And yeah, a lot of a lot of cool stuff. And so there's, yeah, there's a community that I'm part of, because I'm the founder and director of this organization. And that is really, yeah, you know, a community of trans people for whom certain certain practices, some of certain practices, like are like a really vital cultural form. And I went back to school in 2022, to get a Master's in Cultural Sustainability at Goucher College. And like, I think that was a really profound experience for me around around community and also around like understanding these things. I think I had, I had never really been exposed to,[pause] I don't know how to put it, but so I'll just like, talk about it a different way. But I think I had always like, approached art and music from a cultural perspective, as this like a form of like, kind of meaning making, and also something that connects people to each other. And that feels like a vital social role, and also emerges from emerges from social contexts, like is that art and music are things that like, are part of a larger thing that happens when people get together. That has always been sort of what what my approach was, and my heart was, but anything that I'd ever understood in terms of a professional world, or sort of like how you quote unquote, really do those things, was much more in terms of creative industries. And so there'd always been this just like, I think like non-productive tension for me between how I sort of thought of the work that I made, and where I wanted to sit, and the fact that it was so connected to community and collaboration, and industries that like for me, were really sort of focused on like, these forms of professionalization, and legibility, and individualism. So I think getting into the world of cultural sustainability and folklore studies was this thing of realizing like, oh there's another world, you know, that is a professional world, where people are talking about these things in different ways. They're just not currently really talking about like, experimental music, and they're not really talking about these particular aspects of trans culture. So that's where I sort of find my niche, and that is that like, you know, yeah I think for Voluminous Arts, I think Solimar Otero, who's, you know, one of my biggest inspirations, who's a queer theorist, and writes about Afro-Latinx spirituality, and has now become a friend, and a colleague. You know, early on, Kit connected me and her, because I was really in a quandary about like, whether or not I wanted to go back to school, and if so, like what for? And it was just like, I was like, her work was the first like, theory I'd ever really seen myself in. Like, I'd always loved reading theory, but it was always sort of like, about something out there, and like her work, I was like, I feel in my body the things that she's talking about. So yeah, I had a kind of really important conversation with her, and during that conversation, I was

like, okay, so I kind of understand this thing about academia, and where I could fit in, but like, I also started this project, and I don't know where that fits in, and she was like, I think that Voluminous Arts is a public folklore project, and I was like, I don't know what public folklore is, but that feels right. And then, yeah, I like, learned about public folklore, and I'm like,[laughter] yeah, I think she was right. So I think that's been a big thing for me too, is like, that shift from a sort of sense of like, maybe kind of artistic communities, where also like, the sort of like, evolution pull of those relationships is towards like, well, we're a community now, but eventually, we're all going to have our individual careers, and then we're going to not be a community anymore, which is kind of what happened to me when I was younger, sort of like, in that world of like, yeah, Williamsburg performance arts scene, and then kind of like, Black Theatre in Toronto, and like, you know, there were like, especially like, record labels, or even like, galleries that I worked with at a time in my life, that were sort of like a community, maybe like, sort of a community, like, but there was, you know, it was always this kind of like, competitive pull away from any like, kind of core community structure, because it was sort of like, well, yeah, like, we're all doing this together right now, but the idea is that we're all going to branch out and do it, and I think like, yeah, sort of like, having this other reference plane of a way that like, community can move towards like, growing and staying in a kind of like, collective mode, rather than like, just being a sort of like, stepping stone on the way to some individuality, and also understanding the ways that like, creative industries are actually kind of designed on like, a resource extraction model of sort of identifying like, cultural communities that produce, you know, artistic materials, and then figuring out how to kind of like, extract those, the producers of those artistic materials from those cultural communities, as a way of like, specializing, you know, like, it's like how specialization and personalization works. And I don't like that thing. I don't like that thing, you know, for better or for worse. If I liked that, I'd have more money, and I'd be more famous, but I don't like that. I've just never liked it. There's something about it that bothers me. And so that is the hill that I will eventually die on, is that I want there to be a space, especially for trans people, that is like, vital and thriving creative space, but isn't based on producing like, you know, individual specialized professionals who create some kind of like, recognizable and legible work. Like, I'm more interested in how people use like, artistic expression as a way to be together, and make meaning together, and build power together, and like, understand things about themselves. And that thing that I talked about, of just that, like, you know, what I experienced through performance and experimental music was that like, there were instances of agency, albeit fleeting, like, you know, albeit fleeting, that became possible in those spaces. And that like, when those accumulated, they began to like, move from being things that happened in performance to things that happened in my daily life. And I've also seen that happen with the Voluminous Arts events that like, you know, when people within the sort of expanding and loose and porous community, like, have those experiences consistently, that they begin to affect people's daily lives, in ways that produce more agency. And trans people have agency, so that's why I'm doing what I'm doing.

Silverman: And how have you seen, I guess, your engagement with collaboration or with other people change through like, different decades of living in New York, and the shifting landscape of New York's sort of demands?

Russom: Um, I, yeah, that's interesting. Like, for me, I associate those things with just like, being different ages and how like, stuff is just different at different times in a person's life. But New York has changed a lot, I guess, in the 27 years that I've lived here.

Silverman: I love the I guess.

[Laughter]

Russom: I mean, absolutely. But yeah, I mean, but I guess certain things feel like they've also stayed the same. Like, I mean, I think one of the wild things about New York is just like, like how fast it's changed. I mean, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's like, like, how fast it can go from like, doing a thing with your friends in a basement to like, one of those friends being a very famous person. And also how fast it can go from like, somebody you know, like doing something in a very small context to like, some wealthy brand doing something that's inspired that, by that thing, often without that person being credited or compensated. Like, it's the wild, just like the pipeline in New York from sort of like, people making culture together to like, money, like big money. And I guess that's gotten more mechanized since the time I've been here. But I think the big thing for me, honestly, is that like, this time, like, for what I care about, I feel like this time in New York is incredible. Like, it is actually kind of astounding. I don't know how all of the people that I know that live here are managing to live here. I don't know how I'm managing to live here. But we all seem to be managing to still live here. And I think, I mean, the sheer volume of trans people is kind of incredible. And especially, I think, for me, not just like, the sheer volume of trans people, but the sheer volume of like, trans people whose trans identities like, don't really, or aren't really defined by a kind of like, medicalization model, aren't really defined by a kind of like, cis-normative model of what transness is. It's pretty incredible. Also, the amount of like, young people who are just like, of like, young people who are just like, doing cultural stuff that is really like, so much better thought out than anything anybody was doing that I was around in the 80s, in terms of like, accessibility, in terms of like, care, you know, stuff from just like, having somebody bring food, to having like, Narcan available, you know, it's just like, the amount of, yeah, the amount of like, thought and care that people put into cultural events at a kind of like DIY or underground level is pretty incredible and I also think I mean it's like honestly the best music I've ever heard in my life is kind of being made by trans people in New York.

Silverman: Do you want to go out and shout out anyone?

Russom: I mean I don't want to shout out anyone because then I don't want to leave anybody out but like there's so many people doing incredible things I mean yeah I don't know shout out Mercury Symbol honestly I think really like that is like really incredible work I mean and I don't know it's a thing I can just I mean I just I love Adonis so dearly and I think he's just so brilliant and like yeah and he's part of the community I work with at Voluminous Arts and like just like you know astounding to talk to him to read his writing to also have this like very concrete sense too that like um that like also that like my experience has I think in some small part also like

allowed him to get a much earlier start on a lot of things I mean not to take the credit in any way because I think he has a lot of really profound experience uh influences like including like Dream Crusher is another incredible like um queer non-binary artist in New York but I do think like it is it is the biggest thing for me with Voluminous Arts of like being able to see that like the challenges that I've gone through in my life like have become synthesized into like something that allows people to like get a little bit of an earlier start um just because like there's things that I figured out that like I get to share like through the way Voluminous Arts is built that like kind of maybe knocks a couple things that people have to figure out off their list and then I can figure out other stuff down the road because they got an earlier start like that's my favorite

Silverman: Yeah

Russom: [laughter]

Silverman: How do you feel being in this I don't like the phrasing of it but like the increased moment of trans visibility?
Russom: It's complicated, it's complicated I mean I don't think I'm not sure that I would have gotten out and actualized as a trans person without that increased trans visibility [pause] and I think like visibility is a weird thing and especially like I think uh trans people uh visibility is a particular thing for trans people and it is not always like um [pause] agency this is a big difference and um and I think historically trans people often don't have a lot of agency over how we are visible um that's' why it makes project like this so important um so I think it's complicated it's kind of scary like I think increasingly scary I mean it's sort of like uh something that's been talked about a lot that like as trans people have been more represented in media violence against trans people has also increased um you know and increasingly that is also like not just state sanctioned but like state driven violence um uh I mean I think there is like um I think there is a kind of a tipping point but it's not the one people in 2016 thought it was or whatever that was the Laverne Cox cover of Time Magazine um 2015 um I think it's that like once trans people can find each other which I think visibility helps trans people to find each other once trans people can find each other more and talk more and connect more the sort of like artificial nature of not just like gender as it's constructed in our society but a lot of other things like starts to unwind and that like as there is more and more critical mass of people who just like understand the ways in which like a lot of the sort of like accepted constructs that oppress us are actually you know like not real beyond their ability to be enforced by police and other technologies um I do think that there's like a liberatory possibility in that that I feel really hopeful about um I really am like very moved and also committed moved by and committed to the power of like trans people talking to each other I think really incredible things happen when trans people talk to each other it's how I understood myself you know was by talking to other trans people um it happens to me almost every day now where like I have a conversation with another trans person and we like make knowledge together um so I do think that there is something about visibility that empowers that um you know a lot of it's not like my experience but a lot of the younger people I know like you know Tumblr was this really big thing for them and like how they kind of like started to assemble an understanding of their trans identity and

also like meet people and I think like you know for me because I wasn't part of that it's like I can see that from the outside a little bit and be like that's so powerful that there was this online community I mean like I'm a gen x-er I'm like I still kind of hate the internet you know what I mean like in some way some part of me but that you know there was this online community that existed that actually really liberated people um even though it's you know there's a lot of problems with it but you know and I think it's like that that continues to evolve and like where that's happened you know that's happening just other places now um and in other ways and maybe it's a bit more fragmented right now um maybe it isn't I don't know but um yeah it's it's a lot at the same time um I also know with my own experiences with visibility and at times I mean you know like uh I it's not um it's not what I end up talking about in a thing like this but you know I was in a very famous band for a while uh lcd sound system and um as a result was it was a very visible person um especially you know in 2017 when I came out like it was a widely publicized story um you know it was on CNN I went to the laundromat to drop off my laundry two days later and like the woman at the laundromat was like oh my god me and my husband saw you on the news you know um and I was being like uh yeah I was being asked for a lot of stuff you know there were a lot of um outlets that wanted to you know feature the newly out trans girl on lcd sound system um and it was really rough you know it was really rough because none of those outlets were interested in who I was or what I had to say I mean I I did my best to make the absolute most of that time and like get the things that I thought were important to say out into the world through those channels um and also bring other people I think that was a big thing is like use the opportunity to like bring other trans voices into those outlets that that they weren't talking to um I think Jenna secretaries and Casey Ortiz were the big you know ones where I was able to kind of like get somebody else's voice that was a really important voice into the into the media in ways that like might not have been possible but by and large it was an you know for me an experience of visibility that was really invalidating because it was like what they were trying to make visible was not actually the person that I was like for me transitioning as part of like a larger just like becoming more of who the person I am and getting to be that person in the world um but they wanted to tell a really different story um and it was really a bizarre experience to be like you know sort of like uh have people attempt to sort of like cast me in a drama that they had scripted um that didn't have to do with like who I actually was um and then in a lot of ways like ran counter to my core values um so visibility is a weird thing I guess is what I'm trying to say um..

Silverman: Did that shape any of the ways that you now present yourself in some sort of like public or yeah um narrative interaction?

Russom: I mean I think it made me a lot more suspicious of press and a lot more just suspicious of um just kind of like channels through of visibility um you know I definitely have shifted to somebody who is a lot less in the limelight um for sure um and have I guess made like choices that you know sort of moved moved in that direction um and I think I I mean first of all I feel like I mean first of all I feel like I've been really lucky in terms of being a person who had like a a career in creative industries for a time that like I have been able to like do like long complicated interviews even on like you know like press platforms that usually cut and paste the press

release you know it is a really it is a cool thing and I feel very grateful and privileged of the fact that like I've been able to kind of like talk at length through music journalism mostly about things that are important and now that exists as like an archive um of kind of like what's been important to me over time but I think um yeah I guess like I did start to understand that like maybe it's how my brain works or just how my values are like the way that I value kind of like complexity and nuance and also these in-between spaces um it's just not how popular culture works like which is not a bad thing it's just different things like part of how popular culture becomes popular is because it like condenses complexity into things that like the widest possible amount of people can identify with in some way um like so it condenses like specificity into more general things um and that that's just like not that's just not what I'm good at like I'm good at going the other way so um I think at a certain point maybe I stopped trying to meet in the middle on that and just decided I'm gonna do what I'm good at and they can do what they're good at[laughter] so that answers that question.

Silverman: Yeah makes sense. Do you want to speak towards any of your other music projects?

Russom: Yeah I mean I don't know I love music I've made music um since I was a child and uh it has been I think by and large like is it uh it has been like by and large like a archiving practice mean more than anything else um and so I think yeah like there are things that I have done that are maybe more well known I think like the music I made with Deli Gonzalez which like the main album I did is called Days of Mars um was like very well known um especially like the first album I made under Bayley's Black Meteoric Star was well known like the three albums I did on DFA records um which was a New York label that I was affiliated with for I guess uh what 2002 to 2014 so like 12 years um you know those were widely known because the label had was really popular um and I think it's like those are I guess those are part of a larger archive I think the material that I released um on Ecstatic and also through Voluminous Arts under like my Paperize alias which like was a project I was doing in the late 90s when I first moved to New York um you know and was also like very much came out of kind of like trying to navigate the complexities of gender expansive identity you know the basic idea of the Paperize project was like there had been this like sheep cloning experiment and like right around that time that was like widely publicized and I was like what happened before they were successful like uh and so it was this imagination of like well you know like uh this sheep that developed sentient ability uh through the through a glitch in the cloning process and then like figured out how to like use technology to make its body like more human-like and then like moved to New York and like had a music career [laugher] like it was basically the premise um and it you know like it touched on a lot of things about like experiencing myself as like hybrid and queer and and many things at the same time and wanting to change my body you know so a lot of sublimated trans stuff in that project. And there's also just ways in which I was really doing the thing that has been a big part of my music, which is constructing different ways for sounds to interact with each other, like using recorded music as a way to model social space, and removing some of what I think of as hierarchical and authoritarian components of how recorded music is conventionally done, where there's a certain thing. It's usually the melody that's prioritized, and then the other elements are organized and separated from each other to serve the purposes of the melody. So

there's sort of like a very hierarchical social model. And I think the big thing that I've tried to do with music, besides just making things that I hope make people feel good in complicated ways and like lasting ways, I think that's the thing I most tried to do is just make something that would touch somebody in some way, somebody maybe who has some things in common with me, but isn't necessarily exactly like me. But I think the other thing that I've done is try to use recorded music as a way to tell stories about possibility of how, in the case of music, different musical elements can interact with each other in ways that aren't hierarchical and aren't segregated, but as a way to talk about what's possible in terms of social organization. And Paperize, I think, was really an amazing thing with that, because I didn't have a lot of tools, and I was recording onto a cassette deck from the thrift store, and using mostly toy instruments. But I think that I go back to those recordings, because I think the way sounds interact with each other is actually really interesting, and a lot of just liminal space in the sounds of where they rub into each other. I mean, I think that's the thing I got most interested in, is rather than making it so one sound sits over here, and you're very clear, OK, well, that's the bass line, and it sounds like this, and it's over here, and then this is the melody, and that's like this over here. It's like how to dissolve those borders between the sounds and see what happens when they actually interact and blend in with each other, and it becomes less clear. And that also that when you do that, actually really interesting things happen. It's like it isn't that they kind of muddy or cancel each other out. Actually, there's whole other frequencies that happen when you let sounds kind of mix and melt with each other. That's the thing that's most important to me about my music. And so I've also like Black Meteoric Star, too. It's like I've opted to record in unconventional ways, especially when I was still kind of like unlearning sort of like how you're supposed to do it. Sort of working with like tools like cassette tapes and recording live and blown out mixers and stuff helped to create those effects. And then I think later, like by the time I think I made The Envoy, which came out in 2019, and I think I mostly made it in late 2018, early 2019, I also started learning how to kind of bend a studio. I mean, my home studio, which I designed to kind of like be able to make music like this. But yeah, they kind of bend the studio in that way. And I don't know. That's a little bit about my music.

Silverman: Yeah, I know. It's so interesting. I guess I'll just ask a few other sort of like orienting questions around like trans life in New York and what your experience is. But I was wondering if you wanted to elaborate on your experience with health care or with HRT?

Russom: Yeah. I mean, I guess so, yeah. When I first moved to New York, I really, I just couldn't. I was, you know, I knew trans people existed. And I just couldn't find a place for myself in the kind of trans cultures that I was around. And that, I think, had mostly to do with just kind of like, yeah, like I said, just kind of like growing up in a way where I was like very, very isolated and kind of just like naturally thought of myself as like alone and not connected to other people. But I don't know. I mean, I saw Chloe Dzubilo, who's like a, I don't know, a really important person who I met, but I didn't know super well, who, you know, for people who don't know, is like an artist, an activist trans woman, artist and activist, longtime AIDS survivor, who was in a punk band called Trans Sisters and did a lot of activist work in the Meat Packing District with the sex work communities. And just as kind of like a, just a radiant, like just a radiant being who also ate

at Angelica Kitchen a lot and, you know, was this person, I think was the first like trans woman that I ever kind of saw even where I just thought like, oh, like she seems like, if she can be trans in the world, I can be trans in the world. I just think like, I just didn't, I mean, she was the first person that I felt like a pathway with, but it took me a, I don't know, you know, I guess I had a lot of denial. I mean, I think it's the real thing. I just had a lot of denial and it was a lot to work through. And I was really scared, but I know being like around, being in a place where like, I did see not just trans people, but like a lot of different kinds of trans people was really important. And The Center was really important for me on 13th Street. So DFA Records was in the building that the Center for Art Research and Alliances is now, which is a very odd thing that I have, I have a relationship to that building that goes back to tenants. So, and I originally got connected with DFA Records because I got interested. I mean, this is like super tangent, but yeah, I got interested in analog synthesizers coming out of like kind of encountering these things about improvised and experimental music where I thought, well, there's a fluidity happening here. It's like all those sorts of things together, like things I was talking about with like recorded music, but also with like transness and fluidity of identity. It was like all of this stuff that came together for me around sound and like embodied experiences that I had with sound. And so I got interested in analog synthesizers because like just visually when I saw them, this idea that like the sound, you make the sound by turning all these knobs and switching these dials. I was like, well, then that makes sense. Then the sound is fluid and you can change it over time. The sound doesn't have a fixed identity, it has like a fluidity. And when I sort of like quit my job waitressing at Angelica Kitchen and kind of didn't know what to do for work, I ended up doing analog synthesizer design and repair because I had like, at the time I, and it's partly how I was raised, but like I didn't have access to those instruments. So I just learned how to build them and then like had this skill that was my job for a few years. And that's how I connected with DFA. I became the in-house studio repair person and design person for all their analog synthesizer equipment and DFA on 13th street across from The Center. So before I even like knew really what The Center was, like I remember like walking to work and like seeing trans women hang out in front of The Center. And oftentimes they would, first of all, gender me as female and use she pronouns, even though I had a very long beard and make compliments about how nice my hair was. So it's like a real, like a touchstone point for me of like walking to work at this job where I was absolutely gendered as male and having like, you know, on the way there, like some feeling of like connection with other trans women and them seeing me. But when, yeah, and then I started to have a relationship with The Center, I think, you know, not super long after that. I don't remember when the first time I went to The Center was, but it was well, well, well, well, before I came out in 2017, probably 10, at least 10 years before that, if not more. And I also, there's a lot of things I don't remember, but I remember I started going to The Center and going to groups there and stuff and starting to feel at home there and comfortable there. And then always wondering, like, I wonder if they have trans groups or do they have groups where people who like wonder, is there a group for some people who wonder if they're trans? Because I wonder if I'm trans. You know, that was kind of where I was at is like, you know, why do I keep thinking about this? Like, why do I constantly keep thinking about whether or not I'm trans? I think about it all day. Actually, 98% of my mental energy is just like thinking about how, whether or not I'm trans and also being like, I'm sitting next to this woman on the train and like obsessing

about like the way that her like sideburns like fade out and wondering how I could possibly get that while at the same time, like looking at a guy who's across the thing and being like, is that how I'm supposed to dress? You know, like, I'm just like this exhausting amount of inner stuff. Like, is there a group for people who are going through that? And, you know, not that it's necessarily that thing, but I did finally at some point, like ask, I think, or looked it up and there was this open monthly, like trans femme circle or something like that, which I went to and I saw a lot of people I knew there, which was kind of cool. Mostly just kind of like trans women elders who just like, were just like iconic figures to me. Pearl is the one that stands out the most, but like a few other people too, you know, who had just, I had like known around as people, like trans women in New York, out, visible. And yeah, I think like in the, you know, and then that group then from the big open group I found out that there was like a closed group that you could apply for. And that was weekly. So I started to do that. And like, also Renee Imperato happened to be in my closed group, which was pretty like, like that's where it all changed for me was meeting Renee. Cause I think initially when I was coming out, it's like the only idea of how it would work is I could just be like, okay, like, I'm just gonna, if I can snap my fingers and like be a cis passing woman overnight, like we're good. But if there's any like awkward in between thing, like I can't bear it. I think a lot of that had to just do with like having experienced so much violence when I was young, especially around like presenting as somewhere illegible in the gender spectrum that I was so terrified. and just like have this incredibly, like, first of all, just like a wealth of experience, but it's incredibly like confident relationship to like, the, like, what is the beauty of trans experience, I think, which is all of its liminalities. Like it just shifted for me to understand like, oh, I'm not interested in like being cis passing. I'm not interested in passing. I'm not interested in like all these things. Like I, you know, where I'm sitting is somewhere else and it's changing a lot. And think that was, so I, in terms of healthcare, I, so that was happening. I also like, I used to live on 170th street for a while when I, when I kind of moved, like I said, I still retained a relationship to New York, but I did live in Berlin till 2009. When I moved back to New York, I moved to 170th street. I lived up there for quite a while, which was really important for me in a whole bunch of other ways too. But I started going to Harlem United for medical care initially because I didn't have insurance and I didn't have any money. And that was a place where I could just like go and get seen and especially do like HIV and STI testing on sliding scale. So I had been going to Harlem United for my medical care for quite a long time. And it was weird. I mean, again, I also like met a lot of trans women there in the waiting room and stuff. And I was aware that like, that like trans healthcare was one of the things that was available there. And I think around 2014, I also started to see a therapist at Harlem United. So when I was in those groups at The Center, you know, one of the big conversations was about hormones. And, and I just didn't know. I mean, I just didn't know how you did. I didn't know anything. I didn't know. I mean, again, like I grew up, I grew up very, very isolated and having to figure out a lot of things for myself. So part of like the transition problem for me is I just don't, I don't understand how a lot of things work [laughter]. And so I just didn't understand how, how it worked, like how you would, what it even was, like how you would get it. And so a lot of just like a lot of the trans women I met in those groups just kind of helped me understand like the process of just like, even just the thing of like, you can ask your doctor for hormones, but it was really beautiful. You know, I did, there was a point where I just like came into and told my

therapist, Hey, look, like I'm, I've come to terms with the fact that like I'm transgender. And I'd never really said anything about that. Like I had all, it was really wild. I had like all these ways of like talking around it, but never kind of like being able to be in the center of it. And so with most people, like when I came out, they were sort of like not surprised, but I think my therapist was like, it's wild that we like haven't really talked about this. She's like, now I can see that there are all these things that you said, and there are these ways, other things that you didn't say, but like, but it was really wild because she was like, well, when you're, you know, if you decide you want to take hormones, like you'd just go upstairs. And it was like really wild to be like, you know, one of the, like Jessica Zumba was my doctor for a long time and, you know, I think she's retired, but like, you know, she's like one of the most dedicated trans health doctors in New York was just like upstairs. And like already she was already my GP. So that was pretty incredible. I mean, to just like experience that, like level of access and stuff. And I was super scared. Like I didn't take, like I got the prescription and didn't take it for a long time. And then I was so miserable. Just was in such unbearable misery that I just tried it. And then, and then I felt better. And I mean, I still suffer from depression, anxiety, but it was wild. Like within the first six months I was on hormones, like my therapist took like depression anxiety off my treatment plan, which was really wild. Just how much it changed everything. And yeah, I, I don't know. Um, I feel like I, I feel lucky that I live in New York. I know people fly here to get trans healthcare and I feel lucky that I just get to live here. And it just, especially, I guess like the knowledge, like, I mean, it's a big part of like what I hope Voluminous Arts can become. This is like some, some kind of space where, and it has already been in a lot of ways, but I think for me, what, what has become important about Voluminous Arts is like this idea that there is such an incredible amount of knowledge in trans communities. And in particular in trans communities in New York, there's just this, like, there's this vast amount of knowledge that's like, just getting created. Like I was saying, it's like when one person, one trans person talks to another person or when a group of trans people get together, like there is actually like knowledge getting created in real time, but there's also, there's just like incredible accumulation of knowledge too. And yeah, it's my hope that Voluminous Arts can be a place to like, care for that and, and, and hopefully like, increase, increase that, like, or contribute to that in a way. But it's also something that I've just like had, I feel so lucky to have been part of that, like to be in this place where there is just this like vast knowledge base that is completely communicated from, it's held in people's bodies, by and large held in people's bodies and communicated from person to person in real time, you know, and in spaces like clubs and, you know, and underground artistic spaces and like, you know, create in all these spaces that are also like, sort of like at the edges of various kind of like, late night, late at night, you know, you know, all these, all these spaces that are variously like that, also liminal in other ways. Yeah, it's probably why it's why well, it's why I will probably live here for the rest of my life.

Silverman: I think we'll sort of wrap it up soon, but I was wondering, because it's, these interviews are like a stamp, a timestamp, you know, and hold time in a particular way. If there was something that felt really like present or important to add to this recording and in this moment in time.

Russom: Yeah, that's so nice. I love that so much. Well, I mean, I think, [pause] yeah, I'm scared about the way people in my various trans communities experience increasing rates of violence and in the ways that I have experienced increasing rates of violence over the last few years. I mean, like, I think I'm all too painfully aware of the ways in which like all of the difficulties that are part of this current moment politically have been around for a very, very, very long time and are not in any like substantive or structural way new. They are just like sort of being revealed in like a starkness that is brutal. I mean, what's even happened in occupied Palestine in the last 48 hours is horrifying. Forget about what has happened over the last nine months, forget what has happened about over the last, you know, decades. Yeah, like, you know, to put like a real time capsule thing on it, like, you know, we live on like violently and illegally colonized land and that's like a daily problem in so many different ways. And the lengths that carceral violence and the structural technologies in the state now need to go to maintain that are also horrifying and unbearable on like a daily level. So, you know, I am afraid and most of the time I'm numbed out and in denial about that fear, but like in a space like this, I have a moment to just be real about like how scary that is. You know, and at the same time, I think like something that feels of this moment is that like the fabric of my daily life is filled with like such incredibly meaningful connection, which is mostly connection to other trans people. And like the time that I spend in my day is really, is actually like profound, like very pretty consistently. You know, in my own life, I think I'm at like a, I'm at like a crossroads in a lot of ways. What, you know, what has happened for me is that like acknowledging the reality of being a trans person and actualizing like a gender transition, like the gender part of that has been like the teeny tiniest thing. What it's really meant is that like I've experienced just a massive shift in like every aspect of my life towards, yeah, like towards that thing that I was talking about, about being genuinely able to just like express and be who I am in the world and to find people that I can be in the world with and in ways that like mean something and build something. Like it's just been like a tectonic shift. It's now been ongoing now. We're like into the eighth year of that, I guess, where it is just kind of like, you know, I think it started by just like sort of shedding the skins that I already knew didn't fit. And then, you know, and something like being the synthesizer player in LCD sound system, which I'm like proud of and I think was an amazing thing to accomplish. And I think that I also contributed things that are important, but also like, as a sort of like ongoing career, like if that was a skin I knew didn't fit, but then I think it's also shifted to just like also letting go of like really like people I thought I really was. Re-evaluating my relationship to being a professional artist, you know, re-evaluating my relationship to being a public figure, going back to school as a part of that. So it's been like ongoing experience of just like really a kind of tumultuous change of like who I am and how I participate in the world that also has like caused me to like understand my past in really different ways and sort of be able to see like, oh, that thing that was like, this was the big story about that, that thing that's like a tiny footnote is actually the most important thing, like stuff I've talked about even today with like with my music and stuff. It's like stuff I, like I've understood retroactively in a lot of ways. So, you know, I think I, it'll be interesting to have this document at this time in my life where I'm sort of like, I'm graduating from school in December, you know, I'm building a strategic plan for Voluminous Arts as my capstone project. I don't have a job. I'm not playing gigs anymore. I'm, you know, I'm, yeah, it's just like, it's a really wild moment in my life and I don't really know what comes next. So it is

kind of nice to mark this time of like, sort of like fertile and kind of like, I think hopefully like exciting uncertainty and indeterminacy and like, yeah, just kind of see like what, what gets built on, you know, this kind of like, you know, very complex and twisty, turny, shape-shifting foundation that I've built in my first 50 years. It's also, I turned 50 this year, so it's a nice time. It's a nice watershed moment to have a record of as well.

Silverman: Thank you so much.

Russom: Yeah, thank you.