NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

J. SOTO

Interviewer: M. Henry Milks

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M. Henry Milks: Hi, my name is M. Milks, and I will be having a conversation with J. Soto for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is Monday, October 10, 2016 and this is being recorded at J's apartment, in Crown Heights. Hi, J!

J. Soto: Hi.

Milks: So can you tell us your name and age and gender pronouns?

Soto: Uh yes, so my name is J; just the letter, period. Soto, S-O-T-O. Um, my gender pronouns are he, him, and his, and just recently I started using they and them. And my age, I am thirty-six years old.

Milks: Alright. And how would you describe your gender identity?

Soto: Uh, I would say that I'm uh, a trans person. Sometimes I say that I'm a trans man and, or female-to-male. Although I exist in a pretty fluid space.

Milks: Mhm, okay. And how long have you been in New York City?

Soto: I have lived in New York City, just over two years; I arrived here in mid-August just over two years ago.

Milks: Where did you come from?

Soto: I came from Chicago. Yeah, I lived in Chicago for six years prior to this.

Milks: Okay, and what led you to New York from Chicago?

Soto: Uh that's a good question. I moved to—I moved to New York for several reasons. For, actually I moved with a partner who was at the time, applying to graduate school and they... all over the country, and they got into school here in New York. I'm an artist and a writer, and it made sense to move here. So I was very happy about that. So it made sense for my life as well as theirs.

Milks: Where did you grow up?

Soto: I grew up in the Bay Area, in California. Um and I always like to say that I grew up in the East Bay. Often times when you say you grew up in the Bay Area, people think you grew up in San Francisco and I didn't. I grew up an hour east of San Francisco which at the time, was a very different place than it is now. But then also, as it is to San Francisco, it was more of a rural community and more agriculture. So, I'm a west-coaster at heart.
Milks: Mhm, mhm. Okay. And what have your experiences been like with regard to, I guess your relationship with the queer community, with the trans community in these various places?

Soto: Um oh, well... [laughter]

Milks: Big question! I know.

Soto: No, it’s a—it’s a good question and it's one that I don't actually typically relate to all of the places I've lived. Um, which I think now that you're asking it I feel like I want to talk about what it meant to be in a queer community in California. Which I was for a while but I was raised in California and didn't quite have the access to a queer community when I first came out. I came out as a lesbian in '94, maybe—maybe '94. And there really wasn't, because of the community I lived in, there really wasn't a ton of access to anything queer. I mean queer wasn't even a word that anyone was using; at least in my circle and certainly in, you know, it was really about more concealing your identity or being different than it was about... and surviving, than it was about really being part of any kind of community. The short version of that story is that I ended up seeking out people that were sort of supportive of, at the time what felt like a really alternative lifestyle, and then moving to San Francisco. Which at the time, even though it was an hour away, was an incredibly special place because the, not-geographical distance, but the mental distance and cultural distance. And so when I finally got to live there, it was a real big deal. I didn't identify as queer until, you know, I think in conversationally and in the community, probably in Chicago. But actually, personally, and in a way that I felt like I could understand, maybe in the last two years? So quite recently. So I lived in San Francisco and was part of the, I think pretty vibrant gay community; you know, we'd go dancing, we'd go to the clubs. And you know, early 2000s was a very different time. And I kind of got a sense of what it meant to be, um, I'd guess queer although I wasn't calling it that then. And going to clubs and dancing, and going to the Castro. And doing all the things. Then I moved to Chicago for graduate school in late 2000... early 2009—no late 2009, pardon me. Late 2009. And didn't really discover the queer community until I had kind of gotten on my feet and started to go to school there and discovered it through school. So I went to the Art Institute and I found that the community there was vastly different because of it being the Midwest. And I came from the Bay Area where it felt like things were much more integrated racially, and kind of, people were kind of always questioning labels and feeling, you know, just switching up labels. And being really comfortable and I guess what you could call, intersectionality. But a kind of like, performed intersectionality that made parties really fun and you know, activities really fun. And then when I got to Chicago it felt like that was happening but because of the, it being in the Midwest and because of it being surrounded by... Um, geographically even just the way the land is broken up in the middle of the country just felt like you kind of had to huddle closer together and so there was less freedom to think around those boundaries; at least at the time that I was in Chicago. And then—in—and so I didn't feel entirely part of the queer community in Chicago, I felt part of the large artist community which at times was queer and certainly overlapped in a big way. But that by no mean was my number one identity or the identity that I felt the closest to while I was in Chicago even though in Chicago was when I began to transition. And then when I moved to New York, two years ago—I should just start saying two-and-a-half really. I don't know why, I feel...
Milks: [laughter] You're like New York takes an adjustment, and there's this will to say you just got here. [laughter]

Soto: [laughter] And so I think in New York is really where I began to feel part of, I guess what can be considered a queer community, or really began to feel like I was connecting with queer people. And I think that is in response to both how I began to live my life and be a little bit more—I don't want to call it selfishly, but a little bit more with my own self-preservation in mind, or my own desires in mind. And also I think that sort of political, um, scene or the—the politics and the events of the past probably two years with regards to violence against people of color, against trans women of color, against... um and it's really I think pushed pretty hard against my own, what I thought was a comfortable or becoming a more comfortable gay existence or more comfortable existence of difference. And it just doesn't feel that way at all. And maybe that feels like it was a dream and it actually isn't and it's, now, I'm starting to really pick apart, I guess the queer umbrella a little bit and see how experiences of different people are different and resources are scarce and violence happens. So a lot of things that I think have influenced this like, intense feeling of what queer can be and how it can be a positive thing but also a thing to maybe fight back with. I'm not sure.

Milks: Mhm. [inaudible] Okay um, I want to go back to a remark you just made about identity. You said that in Chicago you felt like you weren't necessarily identifying strongly as queer. But I guess in relation to other identities that you felt close to, what kinds of other identities were you meeting there?

Soto: I think first and foremost, just being an artist. I was in Chicago to go to art school and that's what brought me there. I also had been raised on the West Coast, so it was a way to get away from something that was very familiar. So at the time there was just, a kind of intense focus on making artwork, performing... I make performance, but performing with other people and supporting other people's performances and being part of, I think a kind of family? And at the time, you know and if I look—so those people are still some of the most important people in my life. They're not all queer. Some of them are pretty normative in many ways and I think it's just because we were circulating in this, kind of for lack of a better word, currency of new knowledge and excitement in what it meant to make art. It sort of, what became my number one reason for being in Chicago and feeling excited about things. I think sometimes, you know, queer communities can be kind of insular. It felt like maybe because Chicago is the place that it is, it felt like the queer community there was a kind of like—was kind of tougher to crack than I think it has been in other cities. I'm not quite sure, you know. And that's why [inaudible] an amazing queer community there with a lot of wonderful groups. But yeah, it just didn't—it wasn't, it was more difficult to access and I keep wanting to say, oh I was also a person of color and I was identifying strongly with that but I actually, at the time, I wasn't you know. I was, if you asked me I would tell you that I'm a person of color—that I'm brown or I'm of mexican descent but it wasn't something that I felt like I was wearing on the outside. Um I think really I was wearing being an artist on the outside. And I think it's difficult—it's difficult being an artist and I think you sacrifice a lot. And so I think at the time when you start, sort of start to pay—you pay the dues for something really heavily, I think you begin to, you know, you wear that more.
Milks: Okay um, you brought up family and I'm wondering if that's something that you're okay talking about?

Soto: Yeah, sure.

Milks: Okay so um, how would you describe your relationship to family?

Soto: Um my relationship to my family, or to family, the idea of family is pretty fraught. And for many reasons, and I think it's both made, you know, I don't want to use the word inspired but it's taught me certainly a lot about myself and it's taught me a lot of patience. My family is half-Mormon and half-Catholic—which is an odd mix. Um my parents were raised Catholic. They're Mexican. They're from southern Arizona. Um it's very... it's part, it's just as much as a, you know, practice of going to church every Sunday. It's a cultural—it's a set of cultural beliefs that influences daily life really. But at one time they did convert to Mormonism and they had six children; I am the last of six by thirteen years and every single one of my brothers and sisters were raised, or were at least baptized Mormon by the parents who had formerly been Catholics. And because of those thirteen years, I was baptized Catholic because by that time my family, my parents had left the church but they had been in it long enough to instill the beliefs of the Mormon faith in my brothers and sisters. And it's what they knew and it's what they believed their world to be about. So most of my family is still Mormon—most of my siblings. So I was sort of raised conservatively and because my parents are older than most people my age, slightly older. My mother and father were born in the late '30s and so they're approaching eighty years old right now. And you know, I think I was raised with the sort of assimilationist values and because of all those things, when I came out as gay at fifteen, they didn't have the tools to cope with what that meant; they really just had, sort of stories or fears—fears really, just ignorance and fears. And they didn't deal with it, they didn't take it very well. And my siblings, also who by this time were moved out of the house and were Mormon and had only become more Mormon I think in their sort of, because my parents left the church, I feel like they felt that they had to move further towards it and sort of prove that it was indeed something that they were not just introduced to but that they believed; and so they also did not take it well. So for a long time, I sort of had a real tough relationship with my parents at home when I was fifteen. So the last two years of high school, they just like, lost it. They just didn't—they didn't. The thing that I always try to tell people when I saw it... I don't tell the story often but if you get to me long enough, I'll tell you—I have a really difficult relationship to my family and coming out and that sort of um... The thing I always try to like say is that coming out really affected my parents cosmic reality; what they believed to be true about the world and human beings and love and you know. So it wasn't even something that we like could even talk about on the ground. They didn't even have the tools for that. And I do believe that that ignorance really stems from a kind of class-existence. My mom went to the eighth grade and she quit school so she could take care of her family as my grandfather was ill at the time and he actually ended up dying pretty young. And then my father was raised very poor. So they just didn't have access to what it would mean to control—to have agency really. I mean plain and simple you know. So they just couldn't—they like couldn't compute and it also pushed up against what they felt to be real about, you know, faith and expectations about how you should
live your life. And it might sound like I'm making excuses for them but really I think the thing that's taught me those kind of—to look at it that way has been that after many years, my folks and I, sort of learned to deal with each other. Sort of learned to talk. And I think they're still perplexed by my existence. They don't quite know that I'm... they know that I'm trans and they understand that there is something different. They don't—I think that they just don't understand why. You know, they just don't understand why that could be or why one would want to transition? Or why one would take hormones or why one... you know they just like. Um and my siblings—I'm trying to make this story short because it's quite a long story. So this past summer, I—I saw my sisters when I was fifteen over a summer break and I came out that fall after that summer break. And once I came out, my mom told my sisters that I was gay. And one thing sort of leads to another right? Like I'm gay and then I'm a lesbian and I'm gay and then I'm a dyke and then I'm, you know, transitioned—so it's all connected. It's not like I'm trying to overlay one identity with another or say that one is more important but they just kind of happened in the series of events.

Milks: So this is—how old were you?

Soto: I was—I was fifteen.

Milks: Okay.

Soto: I was fifteen and I went on a summer vacation with my family to see my sisters who all lived in Utah. Again... Mormonism. And I saw my sisters and I saw my niece and because of the age range, I have quite a lot of nieces and some nephews but mostly nieces. So I saw my whole family and then I came, you know, I was just sort of pent up and like, couldn't keep it in any longer. I was having a really hard time in school and I didn't go to a very accepting school either. So I was also having a really rough time finding support there. I, you know, I came out and that's how my siblings found out, was through my mother, and they... I graduated school, I don't remember, I didn't see my family often but I do remember there was one conversation where it had been a little while and I had a sense that they didn't want to see me. I was talking to my mom on the phone and I lived alone, actually I moved out of the house. So a couple of—two years had gone by and I said to my mom that I want to go visit my family. I want to go visit my brothers and sisters—my sisters mostly because I sort of off-and-on talk to my brother and she said I'm sorry mija (daughter) but they don't want to see you. And I didn't quite—I wasn't surprised but I was also just like kind of just didn't—I think I just didn't want to deal with what that meant and so I just said oh okay, cool. And then we just like finished talking. And then so I actually didn't see those siblings. One I still haven't seen but of the two sisters that were sort of, they don't want to see you, I didn't see one of them for twenty-one years. So twenty one years later, which was this past summer, I actually saw—I saw my sister in Utah. It was very sweet and I think that she was very sad because she didn't... I don't think she knew that it would be that long. And time's a funny thing you just don't... year's just go by, you know, and life takes over. I think that you always have that person on your mind but you don't necessarily make or know how to reach out. And then my other sister was actually ill, and this was a hospital, so I also saw her. And so this was a very intense vacation but the point being I think that just now, you know, over twenty years later I've been able to sort of take stock of my family and reach
out and say "hey, like how are you"? I don't judge them and I know how that sounds kind of crazy, like I don't think I ever was, I was very hurt for many years and I still am, but I was never angry. I just don't think that that was quite the impulse that I needed or could manifest. It just didn't make sense. Yeah, so... that's family. I mean, I will say that of course informs how I feel about family now... [laughter] That whole scenario; we won't go into what I think now but that's the history.

Milks: Okay, you're sure you don't want to...?

Soto: I mean, we can.

Milks: Well...

Soto: I feel like I'm going on very long.

Milks: Oh... these can be one to three hours. We have time—we have time.

Soto: I will.

Milks: I have time. I don't know if you have time.

Soto: [laughter] So a family, what this has done, is it's given me an incredible amount of desire to be free and say what I want and do what I want and when I want to do it because I felt like I sacrificed a lot to be able to do that in the first place, right? I lost, my kind of, support system. I lost connection to people that I loved and I had a very close family actually before that. Like holidays and everything. And so to lose that and to kind of lose that without knowing you're going to lose it was very intense. But it's also made me, in a funny way, sort of like long for that kind of stability but not even really understanding how it's embodied because I didn't necessarily live through it for my entire life; but like long for like symbols of that stability. So it's very strange, like certain kinds of—the ways houses are set up or spaces are set up or things that people put on their shelves or pictures of kids. It's like the things that you wouldn't even maybe give second thought to really—are really loaded for me. You know in a kind of very sweet way where I feel like I regard them as being very special things but the way that it's played out is actually with partners. I've used to not want be near my partner's families, like I wouldn't want go on—they'd be like "we're gonna go on vacation to meet my mom, meet my dad, we're going to stay in the house that I grew up in" and I would just like—it was just like I was allergic to it. And then I started to get better at it and there was trust as a thing in the world, that maybe I didn't grew up having but could experience maybe later on by way of being in love or close to this person, you know, and being someone's partner who was part of a family unit and that was intact and was supportive and what not. Um and that's the way that it's sort of changed. It's still difficult though to be around. I still always feel like a little bit like I wear my history... I keep talking about wearing things on the outside or wearing things on the inside and I think that that's something that I've been going back to a lot in my life lately. It's like what you wear on the outside and what you're honest about and what you tell people is like trauma and your past, or you know, whatever you've struggled through; it's like your outfit and you're not afraid to
wear that outfit. But I think now I still feel like when I'm in a situation with... it usually happens with a lover or a partner and—and that they have this unit I didn't have that I always feel like people can tell like that there is like a something... it is clear that there is something that feels foreign to me but I think that that's also just me, yeah. I'm skeptical of like the normative family unit of... I think it's really impacted how I feel about love and how I feel about relationships and what I think monogamy is. And like should people—should I be monogamous? Forget. I'm talking about me; I shouldn't judge others, but should I be monogamous? If so, how long for? Do I want kids? Which, you know, I guess I ask myself a lot sometimes. But it's usually a no. So...

**Milks:** What about that concept of chosen family? Does that resonate with you?

**Soto:** Um it does, it does. And I think it has for a long time, really out of survival and understanding that it's hard to be in the world without others that you can celebrate with. Others that you can bitch with and complain with. I think that when I moved to Chicago... When I left, one of the really interesting things about living in San Francisco was that it was a beautiful place. I was from there but when I left there, I had very few friends. I had a really strong studio practice because I mean just art constantly constantly but I was really a loner and it was because I was afraid to let anyone close to me. Um, barely a girlfriend. You know, I was just like so afraid and then I got into school in Chicago and I remember somebody said "well do you know anyone in Chicago?" and it was the first time that I had considered it and I was like "no, I don't. I don't know anyone... anyone". You know they were like "Well! You'll learn. I mean that's what you'll have to do is like, meet people." and I was like aw no, he's right! I'm going to have to meet people. [laughter] And so I went to Chicago, really with the intention of being really open and meeting people. The thing is—is that the lesson I learned in Chicago is, this is going to sound so silly, people need you just as much as you need them. They just don't say it. We don't say it but people need to be loved by you probably as much as you want them to love you. Like we're all sort of needing some... needing that. And then when I realized that maybe my own loving somebody had value; that like someone really was wanting me to be close to them in a friendship kind of way. You know, that that was like oh I feel like I can be open to people because I have something to give. When I went to Chicago, I just became a more open person. Became a more trusting person. And learned to make room for other people in my life and to try to see them more and I got my family. So speaking of chosen family, I am answering the question. That's actually where I, A: got my family and B: sometimes people ask me where I'm from and I say Chicago because I feel like it was the first place in my life where my actions were based upon my own wishes and I was determining my own sort of scenario for how I was living my life. It was very positive and many of the people that I had met in Chicago, um, I still know and are really really special to me as family. But I will say this. I don't think my sense is personally, and I will not speak for anyone else. I do not think that chosen family is a replacement for blood relatives. I don't think that—I don't think it's the same. I don't feel like oh because now I have a chosen family it's okay, or like I'm not missing anything. I don't long for a familiarity of somebody who shares my own DNA or my own way of talking or moving. Um, to me they're not—they're not the same. I don't know, I'm missing the word here. And that I think is a really unpopular thing to say. Sometimes it's like a thing I'm actually sort of afraid to say but that's just how I feel. Now you know. I don't think it's a... it's not a value thing. I'm not saying that one is more important than the other but I'm just saying they're different.
Milks: Mhm.

Soto: Yeah.

Milks: Well one involves various kinds of inheritance right? You’re focusing on genetic inheritance but there are other kinds of inheritance too that don't really come with chosen family.

Soto: Yeah. Yeah.

Milks: Though I guess hypothetically they could, but it'd just take a lot of work.

Soto: Like what?

Milks: Um I'm thinking of like economic inheritance like sort of that or... you know.

Soto: Yeah exactly like things like objects and things like that just don't always you know.... It's hard to um... it's just such an interesting thing that I'm thinking of now, a queer like—like what are the heirlooms of a queer lineage?

Milks: Mhm. Mhm.

Soto: Like what are they? Here we are... all of us little queer butterflies, loving each other. With and without our own blood relatives and are we passing anything on? I guess with this project, it's part of that.

Milks: Mhm.

Soto: It's interesting.

Milks: [inaudible] Okay. Okay, so... that's actually a nice segue into um, your art and your artistic practice because I think that art of course can be a kind of, you know, what's the word I'm looking for? Traces of the past and inheritance. I'm thinking particularly of... well I wanna talk about your recent work. But also the... what was the poem called? Ode to a Dyke Bar or?

Soto: Oh, The Dyke Bar as Classroom.

Milks: Yeah, yeah. Can you talk about that and what informed that?

Soto: Yeah, yeah. So my good friend, Macon Reed, who is a sculptor primarily (visual artist), programmed a—a project called Eulogy for the Dyke Bar where she created this, you know, space. It was mostly made out of brightly colored and formed and shaped cardboard sculptures; like cardboard jukeboxes and like very bright colors. And she invited people, members of the community, to read based on their experiences in dyke bars here in Brooklyn. She did it twice—
she did it once in Brooklyn, she did it once at an art fair and it was in Manhattan, maybe six months ago? The one in Brooklyn was better as I'm sure you can imagine. All of us spoke. Some of us read books. Some of us read our own poems. Some of us just talked. But for her, it was really important that an intergenerational exchange, where not only age is represented but different relationships with gender, and she was just very considerate about that. I was invited as one of the artists and writers, I guess. And what I wanted to write was—I wanted to write how... I always tell people that I kind of came of age in dancing or I came of age in the clubs. And I wish I came of age in the clubs, that's a little bit of a stretch of the truth. I probably came of age at the end of what was a time to come of age in the clubs. But still, it was a time when people were playing records when music was, you know... people couldn't exactly be who they wanted to be outside of the club. Maybe escaping, you know, some persecution or community or home. HIV was, you know, barely becoming to be something that was treatable; so there was a lot to be escaping from and a lot to sort of celebrate about or to live through by way of celebration. All of those things created a certain feel on the dance floor that I don't think happens today. I'm also just dating myself and sounding old. But this poem that I wrote was a... talking about what you learn when you dance. Talking about what you learn in a dyke bar and what attraction. It was about desire too. So like about discovering your own desire. Discovering your desires on the dance floor because for many people, and I think this is still the case. I'm living in New York right now and I'm like, oh everything is great and you can just be whatever you want, but that still not even really the case in New York. It depends on who you are and what street you're walking down and what time of night and what you're wearing. So I don't want to generalize at all, I just want to speak for myself, but for me at that time, you're able to maybe discover desire that you weren't able to have out on the street and you were able to discover it on the dance floor in a dyke bar. It was this place where women or people who identify as dykes, could be whoever they wanted to be. It can be these wonderful, sort of like strong creatures that I lusted after. And where the first kind of taste for me of what my desire was coming to be and watching others dance and learning about dance that way and learning about movement that way and learning how to seduce through movement and all of these things. So the poem really goes—talks through that learning process. It talks about, you know, not wanting to... there's a line and that repeats, ah I wish I had it in front of me but it basically talks about not wanting to leave the history of not wanting to become an artifact because artifacts are left on shelves. Wanting to remain present and feeling that there is still value in thinking about what it means to be a dyke and thinking about those spaces that really not wanting to push them back. Understanding that we can look at them as history but understanding that they still have a valuable—they're still of value to the present. And in it, I prefer all of that learning but then also a photograph, that's actually a really important photograph to me and it's a photograph from Robert Frank's *The Americans*. Which was a book that I believe he, a photographer—a black and white photographer, wrote... and he got a Guggenheim fellowship and he wrote it or he took all these photos. He's from France. And he took all these photographs as he drove throughout the country. And one of these photographs is of a—of a... it's black and white but what appears to be a dark-skinned Mexican kid who's looking into a jukebox in an empty bar. The only thing that's really lighting up his face is this jukebox; it's like glowing. It looks like he's either made a selection on the jukebox or he's about to make a selection. I think it's somewhere in Reno or somewhere in the West. I've always identified with this photograph. Like watching this Mexican kid pick the next song, and for me
I’ve always seen myself as that figure. So the poem was really about being brown and being a dyke and learning all of these things. Looking back and wanting to still value that past.

**Milks:** I’m going to pause this, um... Okay part two of M. Milks interviewing J. Soto. Okay so yeah, I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about your work in general? How would you describe your work? I guess I’m particularly interested in the way you think about your work in relation to your various identities?

**Soto:** Yeah. So I am a writer, first and foremost. I say that because writing kind of filters into everything I do. Even if writing isn't a part of the end product, it's somewhere in there and it's where I feel the most at home. I often make live work where I use text and perform, what could be considered dance but it probably the safest bet considered performance art. One of the things that if you ever hear me talk about art; about who gets to make what art or why you know. One of the things that I often say is that I worry sometimes that the art that people are making—people that are marginalized, people of difference, queer people, trans people, however you want to say it is often—the expectation is that they make art which illustrates that difference in opposition or other than what is normal or what is normative and neutral. And what ends up happening is that those expectations or what people make, ends up being determined by audiences or funders or whoever in a power structure that aren't—that's aren't the people who are living those experiences. That aren't necessarily well versed in that work but needed that kind of constant affirmation that they are not the person who're performing; that their existences are different and they want to learn about people. It's great because they're giving people a platform to perform their differences over and over again. Of course, I'm really really reducing it down to what I think actually happens but my point with this is that I feel like, and this is a very personal thing so and I know that many people probably wouldn't agree with me, I think that who you are—who I am, is implicit in what I do. So if it's me that's doing a simple task, it's the me that I've just describe for you and that has lived through these times and have had these experiences and it will always be that me. So that it doesn't necessarily—doesn't necessarily verbally state or illustrate in any kind of overt way, that it is a trans person of color working-class person that is doing it, right? That is my number one belief in making art and me making art. I will take it with me and I will never change that because what I think happens when you don't consider that is that things end up getting really flattened out and a lot of generalizations get made. We lose the complexity of what it means to be, not only trans but a person of color. But also a person who's working-class. But also a person who's experienced maybe abuse or whatever is happening, right? You can't hold all that intersectionality if you know—if the narrative or the who's casting the net for the narrative, happens to be somebody who's not part of that community or doesn't understand those intersections. I say this because it took me a long time to begin making work about being queer; a long time. Because my answer to myself in not wanting to do that was to completely just shut it off. Not by saying it's implicit in my body, I don't have to show it, I therefore would not show anything. [laughter] I would just create this work that was kind of—didn't have a home. It didn't have a ground. It didn't have a—I wasn't really excited about. It was a real struggle for a long time. I think graduate school made me do that actually. I felt that the pressure to overperform difference in graduate school and so I just completely shut down. When I got out and started making work again, I started to return to the things that interested me. [yawns] Excuse me.
And the things that interested me were, of course, queer things. Were of course queer history; my own heroes, my own gay heroes. And then you know... [inaudible] So I wasn't just losing the complexity. One of the questions of the questions or one the things that has been influencing my work a lot lately is what it means to be a brown trans man whose heroes are mostly dead white gay men. I guess that's the history that I was—had access to. It's the history that I continue to mine because I'm interested in it. But there is something there and what's missing—what's missing is the brown body. And what's missing is like the complication of, you know, everyone else who wasn't or didn't fit into these categories in the '90s. And I say '90s because it's where many of these figures came about and I often look to for inspiration or sort of read my narrative into their lives or vice versa. I think that, right now, my work will always sort of be thinking—at least for right now—will be thinking about those things and queerness but also class. I'm first and foremost a working-class person and I always will be. Everything else is more visibly louder but that's—those are the cultural behaviors and expectations that I come from, first. You know it's the size of the house that I grew up in. It's the level of education that my parents had; it's these things, right? It's these things that informed my daily reality before even a concept of what queerness could be or is or form inside of my body. But I think right now, I mean yeah. I'm interested in making work that interrogates and thinks about where we learn to identify, and who we learn from. What it means—you know it's funny—what it means to say that you're American, you know? I am somebody who, I don't say that I'm a proud American, especially right now, but I am an American without a doubt. I wasn't born—I wasn't born in Mexico. You know, I wasn't born... I mean I am brown and I identify as somebody who is from the southwest and who's family is from the part of the southwest that was Mexico. And then they sort of decided what part would be Mexico and what part would be the U.S. and my family, by way of this boundary drawing, became U.S. citizens. Like that's how, you know, this sort of woke. But in that—with that acknowledgement or that narrative is an acknowledgement of being raised as an American. In a very complicated way but I would rather entertain that complication and talk about it—and talk about it in relationship to being of color and being different than—what's a white person or a hetero white person—than I would to sort of go headlong into and identifying nationalistically with what it means to be Mexican and what it means... because that's not my reality. My reality is more complicated—it's a much more, it's a complicated one. Not more than anything else but it is one that is rooted in binaries sometimes. You know, and also non-binaries and a lot of boths. So I think right now I'm really trying to hold all of that in my work. Just kind of trying to put it out there in the most unexpected ways that you wouldn't expect people to kind of... you wouldn't expect, I think an artist to identify in those ways.

**Milks:** Awhile back you talked about—you were talking about your relationships with the queer community in these various spaces. You mentioned sort of coming into queerness or a new kind of queerness in New York. I wonder if you can talk a little bit more about that? Are there any particular experiences or communities that brought you to that place?

**Soto:** Yeah um, I actually think that it's funny that it's been dating, and I don't even know if I'd call it dating but like hooking up with people. So I'm single and I've been single for about eight months. I'm kind of out of a long, sort of very monogamous situation. And before that, a very long monogamous situation. So when I—this year has been really about figuring out like desires
and what does my body want? Who does it want it being there? But it doesn’t have to be about love but it could be about, you know, kind of just figuring that all out. And that in fact has felt... That along with realizing that I have a lot of love for a lot of people in my life that I also don’t want to sleep with. That I also don’t—that I like adore but, you know. And sort of parsing out, I think there’s this thing that we do, that tends to happen with love and like attraction and relationships or wherever is like you love somebody but you also want to be near them all the time. And you also want... and it's just like this person is the source of everything. It makes—right now—it just makes no sense for me. Why you would ask so much of one person and also depend so much on one person to give you these things, you know? I think a lot of understanding what queerness is and what queerness is to me and finding a home in my queer community here has been like figuring out like okay, I know the parts, I know the pieces, and I know what I want but they don’t necessarily have to come from one person or one single entity in my life or one way of existing. It can come from and also being allied and in conversation with a lot of other people that are feeling the same ways and are embodying those existences and living in those ways and being perfectly happy. Being in control of their lives and being successful and making their art. Taking care of themselves and not seeing, you know, I think especially coming from my world I was raised to believe that you lived and loved in this one way, and if you didn’t like who—you know things would blow up; disaster would strike upon your life. Seeing, again I was raised Catholic, but seeing people around me live and be happy and being a monogamist and make their art and love each other and have really positive, honest—what feel like honest, at least in communicatively relationships, has been one of queerest things I’ve witnessed and has made me want to explore that for myself. And the way that that’s manifested is really, honestly, been through life, desire, and sex. And me meeting other trans guys, but mostly cis men, on Scruff and other apps. Talking, even just talking, or like meeting up or hooking up and being like just about sharing that time and space and your bodies and it really doesn't matter, not needing to be more than that, has been really affirming and has made me feel like that is another queer way of learning and living. I was actually hooking up with this one older fella who was fifty-four, for a while, and the best thing about us seeing each other was not—and I’m thinking a lot about this—the best thing about us seeing each other, I mean the sex was great, but it was also that he’s lived in New York his whole life. He has this experience of history and of New York and of the village, that's hard to get. I mean you can read about it but to be able to sit there with somebody and have them tell you it was like this, at least through one person's eyes, it was this way and "I used to go here and the neighborhood has changed in these ways." It is I think a way of—another way of getting in a queer education. It's funny to say I'm getting a queer education through a hookup app, but I firmly believe that that was what was happening in addition to hooking up. So if that answers your question.

**Milks:** Yeah, yeah. So I'm going to ask you one more, just like big question about identity. Then we'll spend some time seeing if there is anything else you want to talk about. Last big question. How do you understand trans identity? How do you understand transness? How do you relate to your transness and transness as a category?

**Soto:** Um, it's tough. I want it not to be messy, but it's messy. And the reason why I say I want it not to be messy is because that means work and I'm tired. I already do a lot of other kinds of
work. So I want to be able to have one thing in my life stay put. But the way that I understand it now is, for me personally, as something that is shifting and as something that is quite special in that shifting. Something that is non-binary of course. And is moving beyond—as in trans—moving beyond transform and transcend, the binary but also I think other things factor into that. It isn't just about gender but it's about how one practices their life and how one moves in the world. I think that being trans is in opposition to—I think it's in opposition to a lot of things that are, at least now, feels like it's a very radical thing to be. And to play a very radical part of a community to be part of, and I want it to remain so. I don't want it to get co-opted and I don't want it to become—there's a part of me that, you know, I don't want it to become something that is. I want people to feel safe but I don't necessarily want it to become co-opted or sellable and I think that's already happening of course. But that's accepted, so I think I have a lot of ambivalence around what I hope trans does. But for me, it's that I think it's a lifelong journey. I mean, I think there was a time when I was like, I'm a transgender male or female-to-male, and that's not right for me. That's not exactly what's happening. I think that's a really short version of what could possibly be happening, and perhaps not even my language. I think transness is about reevaluating language and recreating language; moving against the idea of definite defining language and that is really exciting to me. So it's funny. There is just a part of me, I think I forget sometimes, that in being trans the world expects that I have given up a lot of something—of who I was. I think for some trans people, that is the case. You're moving towards, you're moving away from something and towards something. You're moving towards your own agency and you're own embodiment of who you wish to be. I had to think that I'm a little different and I think that people approach being trans in many many different ways. So I certainly can only speak for myself but for me, it's always been just layers. It's like it's just layer after layer after layer. And the first layer is always there; it's always informing. It's not something that I wish to hide or that I wish to not check in with really. I was socialized as a little girl and I'll never lose that. That is who I was socialized as. So I was taught how to behave, you know, and how not to misbehave; how little girls don't behave. I was taught all of those things. So I'm not going to, in being trans, forget that that was what I was taught my place in the world was. Me being trans isn't a response to that, it's not reactionary but that's still within me. So when I relate to women or people in my life, I have a sense of maybe what it might be like for them to be experiencing the world because at one time I may have been in a similar place. So I feel like that just gives me more insight into relationships and people around me that I don't wish to forget. I just wish to kind of keep going and checking in and gaining information and knowledge and ways of being in the world. To me, that's what trans is. I don't know. It's unsettling sometimes and other times it's really lonely. Yeah...

**Milks:** Great. Um yeah, such a complicated important response. Okay, I feel like I should ask you more about New York. So is there anything you want to say about New York? Your history here? Your future here?

**Soto:** My future here? Woo...

**Milks:** [laughter]
Soto: Um, I don't. You know, I have a two year history here that's pretty clear. I didn't know history before, I had only visited once or twice. I adore it. I love New York. I think that, you know, it will just punch you in the face or the gut rather. I don't think New York really shoots for the face—it's more of a gut thing. It will really—I feel like it's an intense and by saying that, what I'm saying that is it's an intense city to live in. And many reason everyone says it; like oh you're going to New York, it's going to be like this and like this and like this. I remember coming here and being so, like, no it's not... you're just saying that. In many ways it has been. It's rough but what I love about it is I think that the proximity of people to each other—the things that I think make New York a difficult place also make it lovely because people have to sort of content what it means to share space and to kind of witness each other constantly. I like what that brings out in people. I find it to be very sort of charming, you know? I don't know, it's funny. I don't know that I'll stay... I'm a westerner but I feel like... [sighs] I feel like I could stay here. I do, I do. I think that, you know, by stay here I kind of mean like, yeah I think I mean what I am saying. [laughter]

Milks: [laughter]

Soto: I think stay and not move back to California. I don't like the cold and the weather is the thing but I like the speed. I like how people occupy space. I like the neighborhood I live in and I like the summer; how people treat summer. I think I'm just sort of—I would want... yeah, I'm going to say that. But I like it here. I think that I would want to share it with somebody and that would be what would keep me here. Would be like if somebody would also wants to stay in New York, and right now I'm enjoying it very much. But I'm a cowboy and like I do want to go back to, you know when I'm in the West, I feel like I'm at home too. It's like this is now and this is where I should be. I would love to live on both coasts and just put split my time; that would be ideal. Am I far from Mexican Americans? Yes. Am I far from, you know, a language that sounds familiar? Absolutely. Am I far from food that's familiar? Yes. Am I far from a concept of time and a concept of, a history in a way that I came of age knowing? Yeah, like 100%. There is much about living here that is very foreign, for lack of a better word.

Milks: Okay, so is there anything else that you want to discuss? Other topics? Or topics that you want to go back to? Should we call it quits?

Soto: I don't know. Um... I'm not sure. I think that that is, sort of—I think that it's interesting, the idea of preserving trans people's histories. I think that, you know, we can sort of talk about this afterwards. But I think that for many people, I think that trans people and also a history and a concept of what it means to be trans is maybe growing so fast right now with, you know, of me coming of age in the '90s and also maybe somebody who is twelve years old right now and is trans. Thinking about how different those experiences probably are. But also that not being that long of a time. It is and isn't a long period of time and how that change is happening so fast that I think it's interesting to be preserving the reporting of people's memories now and what that sort of means for someone who is younger. It's pretty great. That's more of a statement, that's not a question. That's it.

Milks: Are you sure? I can give you the question list.
Soto: [laughter]

Milks: Okay, we're done. Thank you so much.

Soto: You're welcome.

Milks: This was really fantastic.

Soto: Was it good?