INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

SABELO NARASIMHAN

Interviewer: Nadia Awad

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Transcribed by Colette Arrand (professional)

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Nada Awad: Hi, this is Nadia Awad, and I'm recording an oral history with Sabelo Narasimhan for the New York Trans Oral History Project. Um, we're in Crown Heights on February 28, 2017. That's it, right? Sabelo, if you could tell me uh, who you are and what you do, that would be a good start, I think.

Sabelo Narasimhan: Who I am, huh?

Awad: Mhmhm.

Narasimhan: That's a— that's a long --

Awad: That's a long one?

Narasimhan: Long, uh, answer to that one. Um, hmm. I am an almost 42 year old South Asian photographer, um, youth activist, uh, organizer, um, and, [scoffs] um, teacher, student, artist, uh, human being. I've um— immigrant, um, brown, person of color, trans, queer, gender non-conforming. Um, and uh, yeah, a lot of different things I guess, that I am, and that I have been, and that I probably will be. Um, I um do— what do I do? I uh, I currently work for a climate justice organization um called 350.org, and I am their digital campaign manager, so I do like digital strategy for the campaigns that they run to uh fight against the fossil fuel industry. [Laughter].

Awad: It's important work.

Narasimhan: Um, yeah.

Awad: Have you always done like, communications related work or artwork?

Narasimhan: Um, I've always— I think like the strongest thread you could pull through my past work experiences has been storytelling, because um, you know, I worked for mostly non-profits, mostly in this, uh, social justice realm. Um, I worked a lot, when I lived in California, with Film Festivals, and using their stories to trigger dialog, or to help, um, community based organizations that were trying to you know, move issues and engage their constituents. Um, so yeah, it's mostly been storytelling, so therefore leaning towards comms and digital and um, other forms of that, you know? Similarly with uh, the youth leadership work that I did, um, working with the youth we did mostly storytelling and arts based engagement.

Awad: Why, um, is storytelling important to you? Or is it just something that you do professionally, or—?

Narasimhan: I don't know how it came to be. Like, I um, I was an English major in undergrad, and I think I wanted— I picked English lit because it gave me the most choices to take classes in everything, and I wanted to take classes in politics and religion and philosophy and Russian literature and you know, African American art, and just all of it. And so, um, I've always been interested in a lot of different things. So um, when I started working for various social justice orgs, um, you know, some of my jobs weren't specifically storytelling, like I organized, my first
job in New York was with the Audre Lorde Project before they got a Manhattan office, when they were just in Brooklyn, and they—

**Awad:** When was that?

**Narasimhan:** Um, 2003. Um, I had just moved to New York and was looking for a job for like about a month. Um, uh, checking my resume at Tom's Diner, [Laughter], on Washington, and you know, um, I uh had already met a lot of people, uh, a lot of queer and trans folks who worked for, uh, ALP and other organizations and um, I applied to run their WAT 2 conference, which was a conference of queer organizations from the country to come together to their anti-war and [inaudible] work, um, in Philly. So I was organizing a conference. So that isn't specifically about storytelling, but um, there were you know a lot of resources shared, a lot of learnings, and a lot of relationships built from that conference, and it was a good introduction for me to New York organizing but also national organizing work that was happening.

**Awad:** And that was called the What Up Conference?

**Narasimhan:** WAT 2, because it was the second conference, but WAT being War on Terror.

**Awad:** And that, I suppose that happened after the bombing of Iraq, or leading up to it?

**Narasimhan:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Awad:** Wow.

**Narasimhan:** And so like, you know, there was this messaging that was happening around the country on this like, war on terror that we must fight. Um, and it was interesting to take the perspective that here are queer and trans organizations that are also doing this work, and let's get together in the same place and talk about different things you're doing in your different communities and how we can collaborate, we're at the intersections of this work, where are some lessons learned, where are some new ideas for things we can try, you know?

**Awad:** What are some things you remember learning about that period? I mean, this is kind of going to be like a big question but I'm just curious given the time that we're in now, if there's anything like when you reflect back on that period, anything that strikes you or that [cross-talk]?

**Narasimhan:** I mean, it was a crazy time, you know? Um, right before I started this job, um, three weeks after I got to New York City I had like, the craziest experience with like, a welcome to New York from the NYPD. Um, I had quickly made a bunch of friends, all queer and trans folks of color mostly, um, and we were called the Goobers. [Laughter].

**Awad:** How come? Where did that come from? The word Goober?
Narasimhan: It came from like, one of us was like, you're such a goober, and it just became a thing, and we were all um, young, we were all, you know, either grew up in New York or were new to New York and we were all politically active but we didn't take ourselves too seriously. We worked on each other's projects, we had nicknames. I mean, the list of the original Goobers is like, it's kind of like a whos-who of New York, like, now, now most of them won't admit to being Goobers, but [Laughter], it was like a little gang. We were a silly gang. But we also, we were like no Goober left behind, you know? We like took care of each other and anyway, I go to a birthday party of one of the Goobers, the diva—

Awad: [Laughter].

Narasimhan: And um, it's a really fast party. Like, the wings come out of the oven, people swoop in, eat them, they're gone, and the party is over all of the sudden. So people were like, let's go to this other party I heard of. So we start walking and I'm like, what is this party? Someone said it's a CR party. CR, what's that? They're like, Critical Resistance, it's an organization that fights against police brutality and the prison industrial complex. I'm like, okay, that sounds interesting. So we go to the party, and the CR office was on Atlantic Ave., near Grand, and it had, um, it was basically an apartment that had been converted into an office. It had a beautiful back yard. This party was full of queer and trans people of color. It was such a fun party. There was a DJ, Aiden was DJing, it was like, everyone was flirting, this Puerto Rican woman came and started hitting on me hardcore, and I was like, okay, what's happening? [Laughter]. You know? New York women are so aggressive, I was just like, a little like, caught up in the moment. And what ended up happening was um, there were two undercover cops that tried to come into the party, and when they were rejected by the people working the door, um, they basically brought, like, 20 cop cars in like five minutes. And all these cop cars come, the party empties out, everyone goes out into the streets. There's like, an announcement made that there's basically a police raid happening. And everyone goes outside and starts chanting “Shame, shame, shame,” because the police are like, brutalizing our friends right in front of us. Um, they grabbed Ricky, you know, they grabbed Piper, like, they arrested eight people, um, but like, I remember them grabbing a friend of mine who was taming a picture and beating him against the front of the car being like, stop taking my picture, you know? Um, I got pepper sprayed, a lot of people got like, banged up, sprayed, whatever. The thing was, we went back in afterwards and we documented all of our injuries and what information we had on badge numbers and things—like they messed with the wrong people, messed with organizers, you know? And so then, the next thing you knew, people were like, going over to the precinct to uh, protest outside the precinct to try and get our friends out. We spent all night outside the precinct, we went to the courthouse in the morning, and it was hilarious—this is the funny part. Uh, someone says—

Awad: So this the first, your first week—

Narasimhan: My third week in New York.

Awad: Third week in New York, okay.
Narasimhan: And uh, um, someone was like hey, can you talk to the media? Can you be one of our media representatives? I was like, I just learned what CR stands for, I don't think I should be a media representative. I just got to town, you know? It was just, it was really funny. Um, and actually one of the funny things is like, the woman who was hitting on me at the party, um, Pilar, she—her boyfriend was one of the people that got arrested. And nothing kills, you know, flirtation like a police raid. But you know, she—outside the precinct she was like, oh, that's my boyfriend in there. I was like, stop hitting on me, [Laughter].

Awad: Oh, man.

Narasimhan: Um, but then, and then the next day in the courthouse I met her daughter, Autumn, for the first time, and um a few weeks later she dumped the boyfriend and we started dating, and we were together for a couple of years. So, [Laughter]--

Awad: Wow.

Narasimhan: Um, that was how we met as well—that's our—

Awad: So the police raid hurt the flirtation or helped it?

Narasimhan: Perhaps, I don't know, you know, those were intense times. Um.

Awad: I guess that's for another oral history project. [Laughter].

Narasimhan: Yeah, and that's how I met a lot of amazing artists and activists and organizers and comms people and you know, like Merv, I don't know if you know Merv, but he was doing comms for, I mean, like everyone was going through those offices during those days.

Awad: Can I just, um, I want to back up a teeny bit and just ask a question for clarification.

Narasimhan: Yeah.

Awad: How, when you said the police were undercovers, what gave that away to you at that time? Do you remember, or?

Narasimhan: Oh, I wasn't working the door. But it was a party that was a fundraiser for, um, for CR, and I think APOC, Anarchist People Of Color, uh, and there were two volunteers who were checking names at the door or whatever and there was something about maybe—I have no idea what they looked like even. Um, maybe they looked like awkward, white, macho, [Laughter], yeah, I have no idea. Something was clearly amiss about them. They didn't fit in, and um, maybe people asked them some questions and were like sorry, you know? Um, some sort of interaction happened where they weren't allowed in, um, later on, they actually um, you know, it's like when I tell friends outside of New York about what happened, they were like, well what were you guys doing? Like there has to be a cause and effect. And I was like, there was no cause and effect. We weren't doing anything, we were just having a good time. We were
just the wrong people for the NYPD. Um, they claimed that there were open containers outside. [Scoffs]. And it just wasn't true. There was actually a big club a block away that had plenty of open containers if they wanted, but um, the people who were arrested did countersue the NYPD and won. So you know, we were right, they just had to go through many court battles to like, prove it.

Awad: And can you just explain for the purposes of this archive what Critical Resistance is and what, you know, I mean—from what you know.

Narasimhan: Sure, yeah, it was an organization that worked, um, on abolition, believes in prison abolition and works to, uh, reduce the harm done by the prison industrial complex. Um, they hired and had a lot of volunteers who were um impacted by prisons and were formerly incarcerated folks, um and they were organizing against all the prisons in the New York area and just sort of nationally. I think they had a lot of chapters in different places. Um, yeah. It was kind of—I don't know if ironic would be the right word or what, to have you know, police brutality at a CR party, but I just remember it really marking my entry to New York as this person who came in, had been met by this, and welcomed really fast into this group of uh, diverse queer and trans you know, people of color and was just really excited about everything people were working on, and then to have that happen just kind of took things up a notch. I was like, New York does not mess around. [Laughter]. Um, so it was right after that that I went to Audre Lorde Project, and for me it was like, all this was happening together, and so, you know, thinking about the war on terror and queer folks and their place in America of 2003, um, it was all kind of mixed in with that.

Awad: Was that, um, your first sort of violent encounter with police in your life?

Narasimhan: Yes.

Awad: And, um, before you came, before you came to New York, what brought you to New York?

Narasimhan: Yeah, so, um, I can start at the beginning actually. I grew up in India.

Awad: Where in India?

Narasimhan: In a small town in the middle of nowhere that I haven't been back to since I was like, three, [Laughter], called, uh, called Jamshedpur, um, then my family moved to, um, Bombay, and then we moved to Bangalore in the south, um, we moved every like, three, four, five years. Um, when I was 14, my whole family moved to California. We didn't know anyone, but we moved for my sister's health, and um, my dad got a job and he was the only one who could work, and I started high school. Um, and not to be a cliche, but you know, when I left um, I had always been a “tomboy” growing up, and I think it was okay until that age. Like, we had a school uniform and we had a choice of jeans or a jean skirt, and I would wear the jeans. And so it was fine, but like, at 14 it was just starting to be noticeable, and all my friends, um, in India wrote in an autograph book when I was leaving, and they wrote things like, when you go to
America, you can have boyfriends or girlfriends. Are you ever going to wear skirts? Um, and I had like, crossed it out. Probably after I came to the US and I was just so embarrassed by what they had written that I had like, crossed it all out. But you know, I came to the US and one of the things that happens when you move to a completely new world is you can kind of reinvent yourself. And I felt like I had been pigeonholed, and I was like, I’m going to try and be a girl, damn it. Watch me try. So I grew my hair long and I tried to wear skirts, and none of it worked very well, but I was very adamant about it. Um, and I—six years after we came to America, so when I was 20, we went—I went back to India. I went and visited my school and I saw all my friends and I had long hair and I wore salwar kameez, and they were all shocked. [Laughter]. And then I came back and two days later cut off all my hair and went back to being a boy. [Laughter]. So it was clearly like, something that I had to do to like, show people that they didn’t know me and they couldn’t pigeonhole me, but like, um, but they were also kind of right. [Laughter]. Um.

**Awad:** Do you mind if we back up a little bit—

**Narasimhan:** Yeah.

**Awad:** And I just ask you some questions about it?

**Narasimhan:** Yeah, sure.

**Awad:** So can you—

**Narasimhan:** I jumped back way before moving to New York.

**Awad:** No, no, no, that’s great. Um, can you tell me a little bit about you know, before you came to the US, what was your school like in India, what was—tell me a little bit about that.

**Narasimhan:** Yeah.

**Awad:** Your life, and then maybe we can talk a little bit about you know, what California was like.

**Narasimhan:** Yeah.

**Awad:** Why, you know, what that [inaudible] was like for you.

**Narasimhan:** Yeah, so, most of my stories and memories and stuff are from Bangalore, where I was from age 9 to 14. Um, you know, I was really into sports, um, and just was like, not only played cricket, basketball, football, which is soccer here, um, I rode my bike like crazy all over town. I have scars, a lot of scars from climbing trees, climbing houses, like, I was just a ruffian. Like, I ran around—the thing was back then, India was isolationist, so we only had one TV channel, and it was a government channel, and it was crap. So we never watched TV. We would
rent—now I'm aging myself—we would rent VHS tapes of some American shows, like I watched Knight Rider, like A-Team—

Awad: Like I Love Lucy?


Awad: [Laughter]. With the fancy car, right?

Narasimhan: With the fancy car. K.I.T.T. Um, so [Laughter]—I love that show. [Laughter]. Um, so, um, you know, I didn't watch TV. We played, you know, uh, all my friends were like, boys, except for my best friend, who I'm still friends with, Shetal, who, she was also like me and did all the same things, so it was fine. We were just like part of the boys. Um, and actually, um, you know, I'm still close with my teachers who went on to become the principals of the schools and things like that, and many years later when I visited them, they were like, you and Shetal kind of changed how we thought about education because you were always doing what the boys were doing, and that made us sort of re-think what we thought of as like roles in school for—it was a very um, it was a very experimental school. Um, it was a private school, um, because in India, private school and public school means something different than it does here. When I moved to California, I went to public school. Um, but it was a private school, and what had happened was uh, there was a Bangalore International School. The teachers there got really upset because they weren't letting in local students and only letting in foreign students, so they left and started their own school. So my first year at that school was at this rich lady's house that she'd let us use, and the classrooms were divided by bookshelves. Um, and my biggest memory in that school was when we were about to have Halloween and I was going to do this very American thing called bobbing for apples that I'd never done before, but our party got canceled because Indira Gandhi got shot, [Laughter].

Awad: Wow. [inaudible] and—wow.

Narasimhan: Yeah. All I remember is the bobbing for apples didn't happen, um, but yeah, so I was in this school with a lot of different people, but it was like, there was a lot of room for, you know, a very sort of progressive kind of education. But still, India is very, you know, educational system is based on like, rote memorization and all of that. so like, I would have bumped up against that if I had stayed longer, because there were these national tests I would have had to take. So I kind of had a perfect situation where I got to have a really good childhood, got to play, um, and got to feel like a first class citizen unlike if I had been brought up in the US, and um, then I left before, [Laughter], you know, the proverbial shit hits the fan in India when you have to take the ICICI exams. So um—yeah?

Awad: Can you just provide a teeny bit of context on that? I know it's not the main point of this, but just for the people who may access this. What is the ICICI?

Narasimhan: Oh, it's just the national exams you take when you're like, 16 and that pushes you to your sort of first two years of college and then your you know, college after that. My best
friend ended up going to art school in India, NID, the National Institute of Design, and it’s very competitive. I don’t know if I would have gotten in, but if I had, maybe I would have gone to something like that. But like, if I had gone to apply for just a purely more academic—they don’t really have liberal arts schools in the same way, and so like everything is super competitive. You have to score like, 102% on everything to like, even get into places. And I just like, I was always—I’m somehow this magical creature that was always in trouble, but also a teacher’s pet. So teachers loved me and I was able to be creative and all of that, and like, do well in school, but still like kind of be giving it all the finger at the same time.

**Awad:** Yeah, I can relate to that.

**Narasimhan:** [Laughter].

**Awad:** [Laughter]. I really can. It’s a very like, eloquent way of putting that situation.

**Narasimhan:** Yeah, yeah. It’s a fine line. I was always taken to the principal’s office but I could look her in the eye and know that she—it wasn’t ever going to be too bad because, you know, I knew she needed me. [Laughter].

**Awad:** Oh, man.

**Narasimhan:** Yeah, no, I was actually a very arrogant young child. Like, I was, at 12 or 13 I was kind of the fastest runner, and like the first one—either the captain of the teams, or picked first. So and that carries a lot of weight at that age. Especially in our school, um, the culture of our school. So I just—I thought I knew everything. And you know, if you tried to tell me something different, I would just—I just knew that I knew better, [Laughter]. And you know, um, I don’t think I will ever recapture that level of confidence, but perhaps that’s a good thing, you know? So yeah.

**Awad:** So then, given that context, when you moved to California—wait, first of all, where in California, and can you tell me a little bit about what that was like?

**Narasimhan:** Yeah, um, we moved to a small, affluent town about 45 minutes or an hour south of San Francisco, so in northern California. Um, we moved there because it was close to the Stanford Children’s Hospital, where my sister needed, um, some services from. Um, and you know, um, I entered into high school and it was probably the most introverted I’ve been my whole life. You know, I spent the first, at least the first two years like, mostly eating lunch by myself, and like, you know, I was in all the honors and AP classes, school was really easy for me. I got great grades, which dropped at some point because I just got lazy, and I was like oh, apparently it’s cool to not put that much effort into stuff, [Laughter], in America. Um, but you know, I was like, you know, really like, I did struggle, um, with connecting with people. I was also like, struggling with, um, I mean, not only did I not know what bands or movies or cultural things that people talked about and everyone knew and I just didn’t know about any of it, my haircut was a decade out of style, you know, my clothes were all old. I mean, we were living in one of the most affluent areas, but we were shopping at K-Mart and Target, you know? Um, I
didn’t—I had a thick Indian accent, people would be like wow, you moved here a year ago? Your English is so great. And I would explain colonialism to them instead of saying something funny, like yeah, I took a two week course, your language is easy or something. I should interview said something like that. But instead I would be like yes, because I was reading Shakespeare in the fifth grade, and I was reading Macbeth, you know? It just—it was, um, I just—I really struggled to be heard and seen, and I felt like and was treated like a smelly immigrant kid, you know? I really like, internalized a lot of that like—that message, and it was probably the hardest sort of time for me socially. By the last two years, I was like, I made some friends. Um, and those friends were mostly other students of color who I could do things with. Like go play pool or see a movie or whatever. But not—they’re not like—they weren’t like long-term friends necessarily in the truest sense of the word. Like, I’m still in touch with a couple of them, but we didn’t connect deeply. It was just like, I needed people besides my family. Because my family, we got really close because none of us knew anyone.

Awad: And you moved to a part of California where there wasn’t a significant Indian—

Narasimhan: There was.

Awad: There was.

Narasimhan: And we started hanging out with those people, but they’d all grown up with each other, you know? Like, so we definitely um, met the Indian community and we um, you know, my mom met people at the Bridge Center, I met people at school, my dad met people at work, you know, we met other people through the structures in our lives. But um, it was still like, hard. I mean, the really interesting thing about immigrating is that like, remember all those identities I started off mentioning? I think the one that’s formed me the most is actually being an immigrant. I actually think sometimes of my other identities as being also forms of immigration. Or migration. Like, I’m also a gender immigrant. You know? I’m also—it’s, for me, the dislocation that happened was profound, and like, um, it made me into a translator of sorts, and it made me into a bridge, and it made me not really ever feel like I have a home. But I always have a very interesting perspective. And so, you know, it’s positioned me in my whole life, you know? And a lot of times I think about like—at that age, I was just—I was excited to move to America. I didn’t think of it as like, this hard thing. Because you know, we were decently well off in India. There wasn’t much of a middle class, so we were probably upper middle class. Um, and here we were moving to one of the most affluent neighborhoods of the country, but we were like, shopping at Target, and like, movies were too expensive in the movie theaters, and we had just this like immigrant concept on things, and not a lot of loose cash, to be honest. Um, so you know, I had never really taken showers. I had never really used toilet paper. You know, we grew up using water. Things like—like I wasn’t thinking of this as like, oh, this is so different, oh, this is so, you know, I just kind of—at that age I think you just kind of take things in stride. You’re like oh, now we’re doing things this way instead of doing things that way, you know? And it like, that flexibility I feel like—I mean, as I’ve gotten older, I get more stuck in my ways, but I still feel this like, now I can do things differently because I never have done things just one way.
Awad: So can you talk to me a little bit about you know, thinking back how you know your experience with gender might have played a part in this rough transition to the US? Because you know, you were talking earlier about how in India at least at the school that you attended, there was some level of like, affirmation for the fact that, you know, you weren’t conforming to certain, [Laughter], you weren’t wearing the jean skirts—

Narasimhan: Yeah.

Awad: At the very least, right? And coming to the US, how you know, that experience of moving to a new place, how um, how gender, how um, your relationship to gender I guess might have shifted or been impacted by that. I know that’s also a big question but—

Narasimhan: No, I mean, I think you know, I definitely have a memory of when we had first moved, walking around in the suburbs when a lot of people don’t walk. And um, these kids on a bike being like, is that a boy or whatever. You know? Like, I was very conscious my whole life of like, not conforming to gender. And I think part of me trying to be a girl during high school was also just trying to fit in. Like, if I can’t fit in these other ways, maybe I can at least fit in here, um, in these ways. Um, and so like, in a way, it was conforming, and in a way it was also my defiance of being told that I had to continue doing things the way I had been doing things, right? So it was a little bit of both, in a weird way. Um, but um, you know, it goes hand in hand with like, you know, the limitations of my imagination, which, I don’t want to say that in some way, because like, I was writing novellas when I was nine. I have a very rich, keen imagination, but I—as far as like sexuality and gender go, I didn’t have a lot of examples of like, the possibility of anything. There was one kid in my high school, and he used to shave his legs and paint his nails, and he was tormented. And that was the only person who was in any way queer, trans, or non-conforming. And um, you know, I remember thinking wait, do I like girls? Like, what’s happening? You know? And then I was like no, I can’t be a lesbian because I don’t hate men. Like, that was the limitation of my imagination was like, well, you have to be—you know, you have to be these two ways to like—it just—I had crushes on women, and I didn’t know how to reconcile them, right? Um, and I had ways I liked to present in the world, and I couldn’t find my way to do that. um, so I mean high school is actually a time that I don’t think about too often, and I don’t—it was really traumatic. Um, and many years later, when in New York when I started doing youth work, um, I was terrified to do youth work, because I think the idea of the American teen and my disconnection with the American teen was terrifying to me. I was like, how am I going to connect with these people? These are the people I fear most. And it turned out—I mean, of course New York City, you know, youth are above and beyond fantastic. Um, you know, this was at the LGBT Community Center. I was uh, ran their arts and media programming for the youth part of the center, and you know, these are predominantly youths of color from all the different boroughs coming in with like, really hard lives, many of them. Like, going through intense struggles that people twice their age don’t even have to deal with, and coming out with like the most creative, the most—like, they—I worked there for three years, I didn’t expect to even work there for one and I stayed for three because they taught me so much. And through that process I think I kind of healed something in myself because I was like, so terrified of teenagers [Laughter] in a weird way and like, not being accepted by teenagers. And then, as an adult, I was embraced and celebrated and, uh, looked up to just for being comfortable in my
skin. And it was—so it was also a favor I could do for them is to present them with possibilities. Like, you can be this way and not be terrified every day, and not be, you know, miserable and be loved and love and be smart and do things in the world, you know? It was just, I often think about that when I travel, because I travel a lot. In a weird way, I'm like a trans ambassador. I like, you know, have been in these tiny villages in northern Vietnam where like, people are like, are you a boy or a girl? And I turn one cheek and I say this side's a boy and I turn the other cheek and I'm like, this side's a girl. And they laugh and they like, look amazed and they look confused and whatever, but the kids, you know, the kids are like oh, you can be that way. And I think about that, you know, like presenting people with possibilities um of ways to be. And I love to travel, and the more I travel the braver I get around that not being a threat, and it's really sad to me how hard travel is for trans folks, you know? Like yes, I get a lot of shit from TSA, and I get a lot of shit in airports, and I get a lot of shit in bathrooms, but travel has been an incredible experience for me in terms of affirming. And I'm like, um, I'm—in some places, I “pass,” uh, for a young boy more visibly, but a lot of times I'm seen as both or neither or I can't tell, or you know, one thing by one person and then another thing by the next, you know? Like, I'm very much in the middle. And so um, that's the kind of person that you think traveling would be really hard for, and um, and I love it, because it's brought so much to my life, and like, I find actually that like, people in other parts of the world, they might respond with like, confusion and like, questions and curiosity and whatever, but they—like in New York, in Brooklyn, you get aggression. You get blatant like, um, you trying to mess with me? You trying to fool me? You trying to trick me? Like, people take it as a personal affront that you are walking down the street. I've never gotten that anywhere else, you know? So in a way the world doesn't feel as dangerous, but for a lot of people it's unknown, so they don't realize that they can hold their heads up and like, walk down the street in Bombay or Nairobi or, you know, Hong Kong, and it's going to be okay.

Awad: Can you tell me another, um—because I think that's kind of an interesting thing to hear is positive experiences of travel. Can you share like another story or two that you have of traveling as, you know, a person who is read in different ways?

Narasimhan: Yeah. Uh, it's interesting because my New York state ID is male and my passport is female. Um, I haven't had any surgeries or taken any hormones, so um, for my safety I prefer to keep my passport female, but I love having different gender markers on different—because it feels more, it feels closer to the truth. I wish I didn't have to have any gender marker. And you know, I've had so many experiences with like, bathrooms, and in a lot of airports in other countries, sometimes like India, all the airport security lines are gendered. Um, so every time I go there, um, I'll start to get into the women's line, and the men working there will all together start gesturing for me to go over to the men's side. And I'm like no, it's okay, it's okay, and like, then we'll—I've been told by the women in line that I need to go over there, and then I'll have a conversation with them and they'll giggle, and like, you know, I just—it's actually like, because I don't get insulted and like, I don't—but I don't get destroyed by it either, like I'm just kind of like, you guys have like funny little rules over here, you know? What is this whole thing, like, these different lines. Like, let me just like—it just, actually it's been like an icebreaker for me to connect with random people in public spaces, you know? Like I've had conversations in bathrooms. Yes, sometimes you know, I have like, you know, uh, people like banging on the
door saying I need to go to the other bathroom and I just like, you know, have found creative ways of like, dealing with situations like that. And I also, to be honest, I think potentially, you know, a trans masculine person has a different experience than a trans feminine person, uh, trying to access, um, female spaces, because um, I think there’s more of a perceived threat or something. Um, and that’s unfortunate and terrible and like, but I think that that’s partially why I haven’t had such a hard time. Um, but also because I don’t know—I mean, I think I just—I remember I lived in Cairo for a year, and I remember, in Cairo about 80% of the time, I would be I.D.ed as a young boy, because the age and the gender would kind of link up.

**Awad:** Can you talk a little bit about when you were in Cairo and that? Yeah.

**Narasimhan:** Yeah, so, uh, you know, I would be I.D.ed as a young boy. Um, and I remember like my first month there. Oh, so I went in, um, 2010, yes. I went in 2010, um, I had a partner who was a professor at the American University of Cairo, and she made me an offer I couldn’t refuse, which was, like, basically a free ride. It was like a free plane ticket, free tuition, I was a grad student at the time, so I just decided to take some courses. The Center for Migration and Refugee Studies in the American University of Cairo, and some Arabic classes. Unfortunately I don’t remember much. Um, and you know, she had housing, she had—she had me hooked up. like, it was great. So I went there for a year, and halfway through the year actually the revolution broke out. So that’s a whole other story. And there were some interesting gendered pieces of that story as well. But um, you know, when I first got to Cairo, I just remember being really preoccupied with how I was being perceived, because I knew that more people were reading me as male than in New York. I think New York, we have different indicators and symbols, and we don’t just automatically think someone with short hair is male. Um, there’s a little different types of nuance here. But I was like, really thinking about it all the time, because like I would go to a café, and um, there were these, you know, we ended up having to share tables with strangers at [inaudible] Café, and you know, there were these two young boys, and they immediately like, loved me and like, started chatting with me, and I’m, you know, and I could tell, you know, they were like, we’ve never had an Indian friend before, you know? I could tell they were reading me as male, so I immediately like, dropped my shoulders, um, made sure my voice was as deep as it could—like, I almost like was so attuned to how people were perceiving me and trying to fulfill those expectations in whichever direction, um, so that—I, you know, it came to a point where I was having like anxiety dreams and things like that and like, my—

**Awad:** Why—is that true of other travel experiences, or was it specifically Cairo?

**Narasimhan:** It was specifically Cairo, because I was living there. And um, I was in a place where I was being more often regularly I.D.ed as male and young, and it was a foreign place for me. I had never, you know, lived, uh, or really even traveled much in the Middle East. A few months prior I had been to Lebanon and, um, Jordan and stuff, but like, I’d never really had much experience in the Middle East, so I was—I had also, [Laughter], I had had two people give me bad stories before I went. One was a professor at NYU who is half Egyptian and queer, and she was like, well you’d better butch it up. Oh, no, no, she actually said the opposite. I think she said you’d better femme it up. And I was like, excuse me? Um, you know, because she was like—
then she kind of backtracked and said, well maybe they won't expect that of you because you'll be seen as an outsider or a foreigner. You're not like—you won't have the same standards put on you that I have put on me. Um, the other stories was, um, a friend of mine, Lisa Bangalia, also one of the original Goobers, um, who spent many years in Cairo, in Palestine, and different parts of the Middle East, and is a gender non-conforming South Asian person, very much similar to me in build and stature and stuff, and she had terrible stories from Cairo. So she was like, you know, warning me about it. So like, I just felt like I had all these warnings, and—

Awad: Terrible stories of like violence or sexual harassment or --?

Narasimhan: Variety of like, being on a bus, being treated like a boy, being pushed around, but then treated like a—just all the sort of like gender related like, she was like, you know. I think she was just having a bad time while she was there, [Laughter], and it got transferred to me.

Awad: Um, okay, so we were talking a little bit about um, some of your hesitation about living in Cairo and some of the stories you had received before going there. Um, and I just um had asked you to explain a little bit to me why Cairo in particular was stressing you out as a gender non-conforming trans person. Um, when, you know, you love to travel, you're open to connecting with other people and other cultures and so I wanted you to just talk a little bit about that, especially because you went, you know, as the revolution was just starting to come to light, you know? Get a hashtag.

Narasimhan: [Laughter].

Awad: You know? As the revolution was acquiring its hashtag.

Narasimhan: I mean, so that first month, you know, like I said, I was really preoccupied with how I was being perceived and like, measuring up to those perceptions, and you know, I was having these anxiety dreams. I finally told my partner, and my partner was like, but why? Like, what's the worst that would happen if they suddenly realized that you are something different than you thought you were? And I was like, that's right, because I felt like actually it was my Brooklyn training that made me so paranoid in Cairo, because it was like, in Brooklyn, if you're discovered for something other than what someone sees you at, even as, even if it's entirely their process of guessing what you are, um, realizing that you don't match what they guessed—they go through this whole process, but it's seen as this utter betrayal somehow, or that, you know, this like, arrogant act of defiance or something. Like, it's taken very personally. And um, I realized that like, people in Cairo weren't going to respond in the same ways. So if those guys in the café were suddenly like, wait a minute, you know, your voice is a little bit higher, and wait, are you, you know? Um, I have to tell you a funny story, actually. Um, this is the best. Um, you know, of course like, if I measured a lifetime of questions I've been asked by strangers, probably the most common question would be are you a boy or are you a girl? I get it all the time, all over the world, in a lot of different ways. Um, but I was in a taxi in Cairo, and the driver keeps looking back at me, keeps looking back at me, and I know it's coming, you know? I know it's coming. And he's like, are you a boy or a girl? And, I just kind of like shrug and look out the window, because I'm like, why the hell does it matter, just take me where I'm going. Um, and
then he sort of answers his own question. He goes, I think you're a girl, right? Girl? I think you're a girl. And then he's like, it's just that [clicks tongue], you know, it's just that those—and he like, gestures over his chest area, being like—it's just like those are so small, so I couldn't tell. And then he was like, what do you call them in English? And in, um, a divine moment of brilliance, the word that pops out of my mouth is “Penis.” And he goes on for 20 minutes about how his wife's penis used to be really small, and then they got married and now her penis is much bigger and how much he loves her penis, and like, he goes on literally for 20 minutes, and I'm dying in the backseat. Like, I get out of the car and I'm all smiles when I would have been like, devastated, you know? Like, not devastated, but just like, annoyed and pissed off and frustrated, and whatever. And like, instead I'm like, cracking up, wondering if he's going to go home to his friend and tell them all about penis, you know? Like, he's going to spread this. And you know, it's just like, that to me was a moment where I just felt like, that's how I need to respond to these absurd rules and regulations and moments of confusion and like, why can't they all end up like that? Um, so, you know, um, I think I got to a place where I was okay with being—a-like I learned how to relax into it, like okay, I'm living in a different um landscape, but people aren't going to like, pull out their gun and shoot me like in Brooklyn where like, if I don't match what they think I am, right? So um, I relaxed into it, and then a few months later, the revolution broke out, and you know, it started in January 25th, 2011. On January 25th, I went to the museum with my partner, and we were coming back and it's this holiday called Police Day, and there were tons of police around. So we were like, maybe there's just police around because that's what happens on Police Day. And then we saw some people, like some protesters running and we were like, uhh, something seems different, I don't know what's happening. Um, and we heard that something had sort of started. And then the next day, we had to—we had a conversation about going downtown to where our friend Dina ran a hotel to see if we were going to join in some protests. And I was like, I was actually really nervous about joining, because I was like, if I'm scared of a US prison, I'm doubly scared of a Cairo prison. I don't speak the language, I'm like, what's going to happen to me. Like, I'm just imagining all the bodily harm and the psychic harm. And then I realized like, my partner who is, you know, female-identified, um, black American woman, um, who had only been living in Cairo for a year, before I got there, you know, she was really brave. And she was just like, let's do this, we have to do this. Let's go see what's happening. And like—but with a respectful like, also recognizing this isn't our fight, necessarily, like what role are we going to play, like we should be there to witness, to support, but we're not really on the front lines of this. Like, you know, with a complex understanding of our role as outsiders, um, but she was just so like, unafraid. And I realized that all the harm I was thinking about that could happen to me, whether bodily or psychic, could happen to her just as easily, and she didn't care. She was like ready to do it, you know? And um, that was it. I was like okay, let's go see what happens, and every time we went out there, it became less and less scary. You know, like, I mean it wasn't like we weren't constantly thinking about safety and stuff, and it wasn't like there weren't some really scary moments. Like one of the scariest moments was actually, oh, the anniversary is next week. It was um March 8th, International Women's Day, so there was like, a women's protest happening in Tahrir, and I was photographing, because I was photographing in Tahrir all the time. It was really interesting because there was a counterprotest of men, largely who had been bussed in. And there were women and a few male allies, and then all these men, and the men were chanting stupid shit like, get back in the kitchen, and stuff, but there were also some interesting conversations happening across the
line. And I was walking up and down the line between the men and the women. At one point I was like, wow, this is literal, you know? And I was taking—because was taking photographs of both sides. And at some point the like energy of the thing built up to a crescendo and the men charged, and like, the women scattered and then regrouped, angry and stressed and scared, and I was in a circle with friends of mine, um, and we were trying to protect them. So I was clearly aware I was being I.D. ed as male, so I wasn’t being attacked or groped, but my friends and my partner were. Like, my partner was like 20 feet away from me at one point being like, get the fuck off of me while all these people were on her. Uh, you know, we were, we were uh linking arms—I was linking arms with other male friends like, surrounding them like, trying to keep people off of them. And we were trying to move rapidly across the square to find a place to sort of hide, and we were actually being chased, um, by a group, and we ended up taking shelter in a, uh, a travel agency or something, and then finally—actually the army came and blocked the door at some point. The army was actually—helped us that day. Um, and um, and then we jumped in a cab and um got—went to Dina’s hostel afterwards, but you know, it was a really like, interesting moment where how I was I.D. ed impacted how I was treated in the melee. But during the days in Tahrir where um, the first you know, like, three weeks where uh before Mubarak stepped down, like, entry to the square was based on—like they had securities set up, and it was gendered. So like, I was always negotiating gender, getting into those spaces, getting out of those spaces, and um, always trying to figure out what was the safest thing for me to do, what was the smartest thing for me to do, and the answer was often different.

Awad: Did it ever occur to you in that context where your cis female partner—

Narasimhan: Yeah.

Awad: Cisgender female partner, was um, getting harassed, um, and grabbed, and that sort of thing—did it ever occur to you that there might be an expectation for you to have a macho response, um, you know, in those kinds of spaces when um, men are harassing, uh, you know was that—did you ever feel that that was expected? I mean, I would be interested. Expected of you at that—

Narasimhan: No, I mean, no—

Awad: Or was there ever that kind of baiting or—

Narasimhan: No, I mean, A) she’s taller than me and a total badass and perfectly, uh, perfectly fine taking care of herself in a street harassment kind of situation. Half of the time we didn’t know if they were saying insulting things because we didn’t understand those words particularly in Arabic, so it made for an interesting thing. They could have been harassing us but we didn’t know. Um, also, you know, like she’s very familiar with me, and I’m not very macho in those ways at all. Um, and but in this particular situation, all the male allies were in defense mode. We weren’t like, punching people. Although my friend Dina did punch some guy, and she was like, I’ve never punched a guy before, that felt so good, you know, [Laughter], like, Dina, I mean, she like, knocked him out. But like the rest of us, we were just like literally blocking, using our bodies to like—I was shoved around like crazy. And I was like, what if they
feel something that's not supposed to be there or whatever. But like whatever, Egyptians have like—Egyptian men have bigger chests than me. [Laughter]. So I was like, I sort of learned that, too. That was reassuring, uh, so yeah, I mean, it was definitely not expected from her or anyone, like, in any situation, but particularly in that situation where we were just trying to get out safely. Um, you know, there were—that was probably one of the few like identifiable, scary bad moments. Most of the experiences we had were overwhelmingly positive, and like, people were taking care of each other and supporting each other, and I had from young boys to old men like looking out for me and taking care of me. So I didn't feel that sense of like, protection every day, you know, but in that moment, in the chaos and the sort of mob feeling of the moment, like, I definitely was just trying to protect.

Awad: That's cool.

Narasimhan: Yeah.

Awad: Um, we've covered a lot of different things.

Narasimhan: I know.

Awad: I'm trying to think—

Narasimhan: I can talk about my family a little bit if you want?

Awad: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I liked when you were saying earlier that, you know, you're a gender immigrant.

Narasimhan: Yeah.

Awad: And I'm just thinking a little bit about that as we were talking about your travel experiences. But yeah, something that I did want to ask, um, given the space that you were, you sort of had as a child to be a little bit, um, a little bit gender non-conforming in school and elsewhere. Um, I am wondering how, you know, what your family's response to how you wanted to be in the world was when you were a child? That you had, you know, this flexibility at school, you know? So if you could talk a little bit about that throughout your life, maybe if that has changed or evolved, right?

Narasimhan: Yeah, I think it's two things that allowed me to get away with everything I got away with, [Laughter], and continue to get away with. Um, one is my parents own history, and two is that I from a young age became the boss of my family. So, um, my parents chose each other at a time when that really wasn't done. They had a love marriage. They med each other in grad school. Um, they were from different parts of the country, different caste, different class, different—my dad was younger, um, it just wasn't done. And even in their own families their younger siblings, both families, got married after them in arranged marriages. So they didn't even change their own families, but they broke the rules. So I always knew, [sc-offs], they broke all the rules. Like, there's no way they can expect me to follow rules if they broke all the
rules. So I always had that to throw back at them. Um, and I think also just the fact that they broke all the rules and they were just naturally as progressive and liberal, um, and even radical, um, as they are, like, just they didn't have a lot of rules uh for us growing up. Um, like I didn't have a curfew and things like that, like, even when I was in high school. I mean, I didn't go anywhere, [Laughter], I didn't really have anyone to go anywhere with or have anything much to do, but the few times I did go somewhere, like, they would never have even like, stayed up, you know, like they wouldn't have been waiting for me to get back or anything like that. And the part about me being the boss, you know, I, whether because of a power vacuum in my family, which is true, or because of my own personality, I soon became, just clearly the boss of the family. So I make all the decisions, uh, and to this day like, they'll be—you know, if we're going on a holiday or something, I can pick where we go, and I'm like, responsible for all the things.

Awad: Are you the oldest?

Narasimhan: I'm the oldest, um, and my sister was born when I was five. And I named her. And my brother was born when I was 12 and I named him. And then I named myself when I was 30. So my parents didn't get to name anyone. I actually threatened them recently that I would rename them, [Laughter]. I was going to rename them, so I'm going to take away all their naming rights.

Awad: [Laughter].

Narasimhan: Um, but yeah, so in that way my parents have always been kind of accepting and open and whatever. I, um, came out as liking girls also to my mom when I was 20, um, and you know, she wasn't shocked. She didn't—you know, she was still like—she started laughing actually, and I thought she was having a nervous breakdown. And she ran into the bathroom and I was like, what happened. And she was like, I was listening to NPR and they were talking about how the gay gene comes from the mom. And I was like, uh, do you have something to tell me, you know? And then she told me a story about how in college everyone thought my dad was gay. Uh, and then she told me about how when I was a kid and um my aunt would take me to the toy store, I would always pick the truck and not the doll. And I was like mom, we're not on Oprah, you know, it's okay, you don't need to tell these stories. That means nothing. That truck means nothing, [Laughter], about who I want to sleep with. So you know I mean, they had always seen me throughout my life sort of gender non-conforming, and um, you know, there were moments—I remember once we were in the hospital parking lot when we had gone to visit my grandfather or something, and my mom noticed that I had like, men's underwear on or whatever, like, peeking out over my shirt, and she was like, what's that? You know, or something. And like, um, if she noticed like, that I didn't shave my armpits or like, my legs or you know, there were all these different moments where she just sort of started to see that like, oh, like, this is just how you are, and then um, you know, I've told her—like I actually, like, I'm less pre-occupied with pronouns. Um, most people in my New York life use male pronouns. Um, still a lot of people in my India life use female pronouns. And that can be hard, um, but my grandmother, who is my only remaining grandparent, calls me by my chosen name and has for years, and you know, so does my family, and that's more important to me, and actually the
other thing that's more important to me is I hate, like, role words. Like aunt, daughter, sister, like, um, wife, you know? I don't know why. Those words bother me much more than a she. So I've tried to like train like a—my siblings to use sibling, and my mom to use my kid, you know, like, so I've worked hard on like, shifting those words. And my siblings use, you know, both pronouns here and there. My dad's been throwing in some hes. My mom is still mostly on female pronouns, but like, you know, I feel pretty full acceptance, you know? They've met partners of mine, they've met friends, they've—whenever my mom comes to New York, I make her cook up a feast and invite like, 20 friends, um, top tier priority, queer and trans South Asian friends, because they need some South Asian cooking. Second tier, queer and trans friends of color [Laughter] in general. And third tier, South Asian straight or cis, you know, friends, so it's like, um, you know, um, a way for her to meet the people in my life and the way for people, I feel like a lot of our queer and trans community here in New York, it's not—doesn't feel intergenerational. We don't have old people, we don't have kids, you know, and it's important to be around kids and be around older people, and like, everyone is really happy when my mom comes to visit, and she has to learn people's pronouns and she has to, you know, and it's just part of, um, the process for bringing them along on—it's my journey, you know? I can bring them along in some ways and some places, and I don't need them to get, understand everything and accept everything, and they love me pretty unconditionally and generously, so I feel good about those relationships. It's a lot like, it's like, what else can I do? I mean, it's the queer thing and the trans thing and the artist thing and the like, you know, like I feel like I keep pushing every button in a South Asian immigrant family's don't do list, and they still adore me. So, um, I'm not sure what I can do next to piss them off, [Laughter], I'll keep trying. Um, yeah. Uh, yeah.

**Awad:** That's kind of a—I think that might be a nice place, a nice note to sort of end on.

**Narasimhan:** Yeah, that feels good.

**Awad:** As food for thought.

**Narasimhan:** Yeah.

**Awad:** Anyway, thank you, Sabelo.

**Narasimhan:** Sure.

**Awad:** Alright.