NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

DAN ROSENSWEET

Interviewer: Sebastián Castro Niculescu

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Sebastián Castro Niculescu: Hello. My name is Sebastián Castro Niculescu and I will be having a conversation with Dan Rosensweet for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York City Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is June 27, 2018 and this is being recorded at the New York City Public Library offices.

Niculescu: Hi Dan.

Dan Rosensweet: Hello.

Niculescu: [Laughter] How are you doing today?

Rosensweet: I'm OK. [Laughter]

Niculescu: So why don't we start by you telling me how we got in touch and how you came to find out about the Trans Oral History Project.

Rosensweet: Sure. Well so, um, my fabulous mother actually was the one who told me about this project, um, I came out to her as a trans back in November—it went OK and so we've, but but she's been like coming through in a clutch for me like really reading like educating herself I'm super, super lucky and she went to an event at the Brooklyn Museum where Michelle was speaking, um, Michelle O'Brien—

Niculescu: Yeah, yeah.

Rosensweet: —yes, was speaking and mentioned this project and I had just finished my—we call it a Senior Project, it's like a Capstone, or my Undergraduate Thesis at SUNY Purchase which was of a very similar nature to exactly what the Trans Oral History Project is doing and I was like, incredible, like let's, let's, let's make this happen so I like literally the moment—well not the moment she told me because it was like eleven o'clock at night and I was I need to [inaudible] but the next day I emailed Michelle and I was like, just a lot of exclamation points, I just sent her like fifteen exclamation points in a row.

Niculescu: [Laughter]

Rosensweet: So that's basically how I found out about the project. And then I went to, this past week, these past two weeks I went to the talk on, um, trans women of color or trans people of color in sex work and met you there and met, officially met Michelle there and had an amazing like enlightening experience at that talk and, um, as if I weren't invigorated enough to be a part of this project like, like I still am now, I'm so honored to be talking to you now.

Niculescu: Ah, incredible and I'm so excited to be talking to you. Um, so maybe let's start with, where were you born?
Rosensweet: Sure, yeah, so I was born at Methodist Hospital in Park Slope Brooklyn New York and I was raised in Sheepshead Bay Brooklyn and now, when I was 8 years old my family moved to Marine Park and that is the family home, that is currently where I’m residing, um, so, um, yeah, so I guess the short answer is Sheepshead bay, Brooklyn.

Niculescu: And what were your parents kind of doing at the time of your birth?

Rosensweet: Sure, so like just a couple of years—oh, ok so just a couple of years before I was born, my father—so he's a 20 year military veteran and around the time I was born he finished his time in the military and opened a business with my mother and it had gone bankrupt a year or two before I was born so I was off to a good start—

Niculescu: Ah okay—

Rosensweet: —but they had me in spite of that and, um, which I'm ultimately thankful for [Laughter]

Niculescu: [Laughter]

Rosensweet: That was what was going on, it was 1995, um, the nineties were happening so that’s exciting and, yeah, I'm sure there was… I'm, I am completely drawing a blank at this point to remember what the most popular song was the month I was born—

Niculescu: [Laughter]

Rosensweet: But, you know, it was a song.

Niculescu: Yeah, ya, right like smack in the middle of the nineties.

Rosensweet: Exactly, so that was, like I mean, I'm sure it was an amazing song...

Niculescu: [Laughter] So, based on that, like what was it like growing up having had your parents' business go bankrupt just two years before you were born?

Rosensweet: I really didn't know about it, like I wasn't aware of it, it happened like two years before so they had enough time to recover and like I wouldn't have, I didn't know that that had happened, I mean obviously they wouldn't say to their infant baby hey we went bankrupt recently, like—

Niculescu: [Laughter] Yeah, yeah.

Rosensweet: But they provided for me extremely, like considering that happened, like very, very well, like I didn't know until probably I was like even past thirteen—

Niculescu: Okay.
**Rosensweet:*** Like that had happened because that's how well they were able to recover and I'm still very unclear as to how they were able to recover so well, maybe there's some shady business going on [Laughter]

**Niculescu:** [Laughter]

**Rosensweet:** ... I don’t even want to know about but like, and that's totally a joke, I doubt there was, we’re not even going to get into it, but like they were able to like provide and I’m ostensibly an only child so like, they were able to provide, um... well actually I say ostensibly because I also didn’t know until I was about 5 or 6 that I had a half-sister who they had been—

**Niculescu:** Oh wow.

**Rosensweet:** —also been able to care for, um, I didn’t know about that either so like there's a lot of financial business going on that I had literally no idea about.

**Niculescu:** Huh.

**Rosensweet:** But I was ostensibly an only child and they were like we, we can make this work, so they did and, you know, I have nothing to complain about, really, as far as that's concerned. I went to a lovely preschool, a Bank Street preschool—

**Niculescu:** [Chuckles]

**Rosensweet:** In Park Slope so I was like, you know, none the wiser.

**Niculescu:** Okay. And so then how any of these realizations affect the process of like getting to know your family and growing up?

**Rosensweet:** Yeah, I guess you know it's like one of those things where it's like, um... I don’t know I’ve never even put that much thought into it, because that's how little I felt it impacted things I mean apparently like my dad had put in a lot of time, my dad was a Major in the army, was a Green Beret in Vietnam so he like really put in time in the military and did really well for himself and like, um, through doing that but that was all very much gone by the time I was born, like everything he had built from that had sort of gone away so, maybe I think... so I mentioned to you before this interview started, so I don’t know if we want to create this before of pre-interview, but before the interview started I mentioned that I come from an environment of fear—

**Niculescu:** Yeah, yeah.

**Rosensweet:** And I think that, that is where that probably stems from in a large way and being from an environment of fear certainly, like, affects I think, like a queer person, affects you a lot and even if the fear is not directed at you, even if it's not used against you because I'm not
going to say it has been because for the most part things have been good—they haven't been perfect but they've been... I'm very lucky for my parents to have been the way that they are with me now but I think that, like, it took me maybe longer than it might have otherwise to come to grips with myself due to the fact that there was so much anxiety and fear and my father, to this day, it's very difficult to talk to me about anything that doesn't revolve around money and when I was like, even even when I was like 10 or 11 years old he was telling me that, um, like whenever I would tell him what I wanted to do, like if I wanted to be a paleontologist he'd be like well you know you need a backup plan, you know—

Niculescu: Yeah, yeah.

Rosensweet: Like it was like that. Not to say that that's a weird thing, not to say that's a unique thing but it, but it, the anxiety was there and my mother, um, I've learned more and more recently, had a very difficult childhood, like a very traumatic childhood which I've only recently learned about. So, I think there's just this fear that was building up and I'm a very fearful person which makes this process for me, this process of coming to terms with like who I am as a queer person as a trans person very difficult because like fear is such like a, I mean it stunts anybody in anything but certainly here it like, um, when I'm given solid evidence that I should be afraid and I'm already afraid for abstract reasons that I can't evenly properly access, um, I would say that is sort of how my childhood is manifested in the context of this conversation, you know what I mean?

Niculescu: Yeah, yeah.

Rosensweet: Yeah, I don't know, I don't mean to be too vague and heavy about it but I think that's kind of where my head's at about it right now.

Niculescu: Okay. And so then maybe, in kind of talking about fear and the environment that it does create, if you're comfortable maybe in the context of that, could you talk a bit more about coming to terms with your queerness or the ways in which that maybe manifested?

Rosensweet: Yeah, now that, that that was a process—

Niculescu: [Chuckling]

Rosensweet: So I was already a very... Okay, so I was a very overweight child, like very, very heavy and I was mercilessly teased and bullied about it. And I bring those two things together because of course now I'm dealing with my connection to my body, you know what I mean, like what does that mean. I think back, like, okay of course when I watch interviews with trans folks or like you know any narrative that's sort of looks at trans individuals there's always the question of when did you figure it out or what were the things that led you to realizing that you were a transgender person and those waters are a little muddied for me because I was always uncomfortable with my body and it phased me constantly because like I was always told my body wasn't right, you know what I mean, being so overweight and so like from basically the time when I entered school even, even at the preschool I was at which was pretty like, like
the classroom I was in was literally called the Rainbow Room and the other room was the Bear Room, so you've got to understand this was a very open minded preschool environment it was amazing, I'm very lucky to have gone there but even in that there was still body shaming which of course is a buzz word too that I'm applying to 3 year-olds but it was there, you know what I mean, so I remember as early as being in pre-school that, and of course I mean you would imagine that people running a preschool with a Rainbow Room and a Bear Room they were open to me like wearing dresses and like doing that and it's kind of a thing where it wasn't really scorned at all like they were just do your thing. I do remember one day where my parents came for a parent-teacher meeting and I went to like put on a dress cause that's what I guess I had taken to doing in preschool, I remember that's when my dad was like what are you doing and I don't remember a lot of the other times I did that but I know there were other times, I remember that time, like, very specifically. I remember I was in a corner of the room and that's kind of where I think the narrative starts for me and, like, for the first time sort of realizing that, like, I guess that's not something I should be doing. And, moving down the line, I would spend a lot of time at my grandmother's house because both of my parents worked and my grandmother would like—like I was always playing with her shoes and playing with her clothes and, like, this and that and it's sort of interesting because since I sort of did come from like, like I went to this preschool, you know what I mean, like I spent a lot of time with my grandmother and also my aunt and my uncle who were very, like, open-minded, like liberal progressive people and my aunt and uncle spent a lot of time with, like there were queer folks around, you know what I mean, like in my childhood but there was this interesting dichotomy of being, well like on the one hand I'm seeing this and this feels like a natural part of my life but on the other hand I getting like my father's sort of military background and military values telling me that it's not, you know what I mean, and sort of connecting that to my identity didn't sort of come until I was in middle school, when I came out as gay. So I came out as gay in middle school not to many people but just a couple of people and, um, I came out as gay because I was like well I know I'm different, I don't think I'm gay but this is where the language exists right now in 2006, you know what I mean—

Niculescu: Yeah, yeah.

Rosensweet: Like this is as far as my language can really take me right now.

Niculescu: So you were eleven at that time?

Rosensweet: Probably 12 or 13.

Niculescu: Okay.

Rosensweet: Probably 12 or 13. Yeah, um, because, well I was attracted to male bodies but I also knew I was attracted to female bodies and female people and male people, I knew that, but like the idea of being pansexual was certainly not for a 13 year-old in... Well specifically also I should say that Sheepshead Bay and Marine Park where I live now, these are two like politically red areas in Brooklyn, certainly for like... and, and, certainly at the time like the idea of being pansexual was not something, bisexual was hardly [inaudible], you were gay or you were
straight, it's kind of like that was the binary. And then, the idea that you would feel like you were not the gender you were assigned at birth was literally not something that was part of the lexicon until YouTube came out which I'm sure for like Millennial queer people is like how many times have we said that and then YouTube happened and that's an important thing and I watched every single—what is her name—Katie Couric I think it was, interview with like trans children—

Niculescu: Ah, okay.

Rosensweet: Like I don't remember if it was Katie Couric but it was this whole, like there were so many hour-long, like 60 Minutes and all these news shows specials on trans youth and like, I'd never watched anything about gay folks and not because I didn't care I cared a lot, I remember once I talked one of my fellow, like I went to a day camp and I talked one of my fellow campers out of being homophobic, which is still a win for me, like—

Niculescu: Wow.

Rosensweet: I'm still riding that wave. But like, I wasn't watching stuff about gay culture, I was watching stuff about trans culture and trans culture of course at this time was like, there wasn't really a trans culture, you know what I meant, it's not like this was something kids were talking about in school like how I think they are now I don't know, I hear my kids talking about at camp so I think they're having conversation about it now, we talked about pronouns the other day so like, there's like—

Niculescu: [inaudible]

Rosensweet: Yeah, it could've gone better but we're working on it but, um, it wasn't happening then and, and, like, at the same time I was constantly taking my mother's clothes and like doing all this and and I was watching these interviews on YouTube and, but I was led to believe because of course when you're in a very masculine environment especially right when the internet's hitting like there was this thing like I was oh I have what I heard the term fetish, you know what I mean, what I have is a fetish behavior even like at 12 or 13 which is a weird thing to start thinking about yourself at 12 or 13, you know what I mean, like I have a fetish.

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: You know what I mean, like I don't—I'm not going to pretend I know about the relationship between like young and preadolescent people to like fetishes, I can't like speak to that, I don't know but it's just upon my reflecting on it it seems weird to have had, at the time, well I guess I'm just like, I guess I just have a fetish, you know what I mean—

Niculescu: [Laughter]

Rosensweet: Cause like that's sort of how it was presented to me because when I looked up, when I sort of cross-referenced these feelings I had and these things I was watching with the
internet and what I could ask people on there and what forums I could read that was the conclusion, that you were a cross-dresser with a fetish, do you know what I mean?

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: And so... especially considering that like I was also like, I'd come out as gay but I knew primarily I was still more attracted to women generally, I was confused, you know what I mean, because I was like, well I can't be what these kids are, like these trans kids are, they say they're attracted to the opposite gender, they say they're heterosexual people. I was like, I can't be a trans person and be attracted to the same gender I identify as. That, that's nuts.

Niculescu: [Laughter]

Rosensweet: You know what I mean, like, and I remember one time I think I was like, I was around the same age I was maybe a year later and I saw a video of like a trans man who was gay. I remember I talked to my mom I was like, mom, you'll never guess what I just saw—

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: I saw a video about a trans man who likes men. I was like, can you believe that?

Niculescu: [Chuckling]

Rosensweet: And she was like oh that's interesting, like very much like let's get that shit out of here, you know.

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: Ooops, I don't know if I'm allowed to say the shit word but that was more or less the response and then the last thing I'll say about this is in terms of like, well actually okay two more things. So, in high school I began struggling with an eating disorder cause like of course like after years of being super overweight it was like hard on me but also like I guess, unfortunately the image of the androgynous body is the thin one, I don't think that's fair I don't think that's valid but that is what the, what media representation of the quote-unquote androgynous body would like us to believe that is the thin body, I did not have a thin body I also do not have a hairless body I also do not have a small body, you know what I mean, so I, um, at my heaviest that I ever was in my life I think I was like 240 pounds, 250 pounds. I, um, brought myself down to 120 pounds and, of course yet again, gender is a part, very much a part of this because if you're a male body person with an eating disorder people just think you're taking care of yourself, you know what I mean—

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: Like especially if you were already heavy and then have an eating disorder people are just like well good for you, you know what I mean like, and not to say it's harder, that's not
what I'm saying at all but the experience of being a male-bodied person with an eating disorder is interesting because that's not what anybody calls it and no one is concerned, you know what I mean, they're like, well he has a handle on it, you know what I mean, that was pretty much the perception of what I was going through until one day, um, an acquaintance of mine in high school, who of course I will not name, but an acquaintance of mine in high school who had to leave to deal with eating issues, she didn't talk to me directly but through a friend of mine, he told me that she had expressed concern, she was like I see what's happening and she was like are you okay, through this person we didn't know each other very well so I think she didn't want to like overstep I guess is what it was but my of course understanding back then of appropriate boundaries and like talking about like eating disorders—I wouldn't even call it an eating disorder at the time, you know what I mean. Like that's not what I thought it was, I never thought it was that. I didn't realize it was that until I got to college and we had open discourse about these kinds of things, you know what I mean. But she expressed that concern. I think I just kind of laughed it off, I was like, nah, but I remember I was just like angry all the time I was like, I was sick, like I was sick, um, and even to this day my mom doesn't really acknowledge that was what seemed to be what was going on I think because that's our thing, to sort of like—I understand it, you know what I mean but, um, the only time, but I was happy because and my partner at the time can certainly attest to this, I was like, I would tell my partner at the time I can finally, like I can dress the way I want to and I would wear anything. And like when we were together, like in private, I would like present feminine and then when I went to school I would just wear literally anything like tops that, like children's t-shirts and short shorts like jean cut-off shorts and my dad threw away like two pairs of jean cut-off shorts that I'd gotten but I was just like I can be and dress however I want.

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: And, of course, at the same time I started to get a lot of sexual attention that I'd never gotten before so this is where like my gender really started to, and my sexuality really started to like freak me out and become overwhelming. And basically the last thing I want to say about it cause I don't want to, this conversation could literally go forever, well not forever, I can do probably another half an hour but SUNY Purchase is a liberal arts public college in New York, in Westchester County New York that is incredibly queer friendly and incredibly positive and, um, that environment helped me so much and helped me deal with like my eating and helped me start building a healthy relationship with my gender identity and like put me on the path where I am today so like, of course there was a lot involved in that but that's pretty much my trajectory. I didn't mean to prat along about it, you know, but I guess cause I'm still trying to understand it.

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: And I guess like my bottom line—not my bottom line but like what's interesting to me is, for me as like a trans person who is like not heterosexual, you know what I mean, or not like... I'm not going to say everyone identifies that way but like, I'm, I'm certainly not, like I'm a pansexual person. And I do have a lot of like interests that would be probably traditionally defined as like male and, um, I do have a very masculine body so all those things made it difficult
to sort of figure out where I was at, you know what I mean but so, it took me a while for many reasons but those certainly didn't help, you know.

Niculescu: So I guess what I'm hearing in that last comment is you're kind of butting up against two very rigid binaries like a kind of binary transness and then also like the gay/straight binary and so I'm wondering at what point, knowing now the ways in which you're kind of approaching it, at what point were you starting to develop a vocabulary for that or what were the things that you encountered that helped you develop that vocabulary?

Rosensweet: Yeah, like I said, being at Purchase is what sort of opened me up to all of this. I'm not gonna say I never would have figured it out if I hadn't gone to Purchase, I'm sure that's not true, but I think there would have been a lot of abstract feelings that I wouldn't have been really able to place for a while had I not gone there because like... and even like in my wanting to, my interest in HRT, it's like there's a part of me that am I sure this is what I want, which I'm sure many people go through but it's the kind of thing where it's like I have a lot of complex feelings about my gender and how it manifests itself and things that confuse me, you know what I mean, so it's like the binary is super confusing to me and also, of course, the fact that I don't even, I don't believe in it to begin with so then I'm like, but then am I, and then there's this thing where I'm like am I adhering to it by like wanting to take hormones like am I now giving into the binary, you know what I mean, like just these questions but then it's like my gender therapist, who's wonderful, said this thing to me when I was talking to her where she was like, she had a professor who had, he ran into a wall and then he got up and he said so that wall is socially constructed—

Niculescu: [Chuckling]

Rosensweet: But that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist, you know what I mean?

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: So it's like that idea right there has been very hopeful for me recently because it's like I can have this queer theory, like gender theory battle in my head all day, you know what I mean, but it's like at the end of the day I can rue social constructions until the cows come home but it's not gonna make my life condition any better.

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: You know what I mean and given the state of things as they are that's where I kind of need—and this is the sort of stuff that Purchase kind of taught me and I think the very first time that I really started seriously to think about this was at a FORTH meeting so Feminist Organizing Real Transformation Here so basically Purchase's Feminist Club which I was a Treasurer of my last year at Purchase, um, helped me a lot and I remember at one of my first meetings when everyone was going around and sharing their pronouns, one, uh, someone I knew like an acquaintance of mine was basically like, yeah my pronouns are she/her whatever that means and I was like, oh, like that unlocked a lot of interesting thoughts for me, you know
what I mean, I was like that's super interesting. I know that seems like a small thing but that really spoke to me when she said that because I had never thought of it that way and like I was presenting feminine and using male like he/him pronouns and I was like, uh, ah, like just figuring a lot of stuff out. Ultimately I realized what [inaudible] for me but just the idea that like there are these structures and there are these labels over which I had no control, like learning this from people who had acquired that sort of information from wherever they acquired it and then shared it with me and then I processed it and it was super helpful and like being in an environment like that made me feel like I could present how I wanted to and like I could work this stuff out and like doing that actively and living that way and being able to go to class presenting feminine with makeup and a wig and just living my fullest life, you know what I mean. Like it breaks my heart that not everyone can have access to an environment like that because that was so integral to me being able to figure this out but I think if I hadn't been able to actively sort through myself in this way I wouldn't have been able to put the pieces together as quickly as I did. So, basically, yeah specifically-speaking Purchase for me but just in general like having a supportive environment—

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: Which goes without saying that was important but I can't even express how important it was for me.

Niculescu: Yeah. So I guess I'm wondering your, so like you've really beautifully spoken about the interpersonal environment you're within that helped [inaudible] and so I'm wondering if maybe there are things outside of that, or like being, um, like you mentioned kind of like YouTube that being a structure that was in existence in the early stages of a kind of vocabulary and so I was just wondering if at this point there was like a kind of comparable thing going on or if there were certain kind of, um, culture things or anything that was also informing.

Rosensweet: Oh, hell yeah.

Niculescu: [Laughter]

Rosensweet: Like media and pop culture has been like super, super like illuminating for me, like what I tend towards. I mean first of all I would like to say—and this isn’t even necessarily, this is maybe slightly tangential but my first favorite song ever when I was like when I was three or four years old was Do You Believe in Life After Love by Cher—

Niculescu: [Laughter]

Rosensweet: Which I think kind of sets the tone for my whole life, you know—

Niculescu: Yeah, yeah.

Rosensweet: What I mean, like right there, but then moving on like um... like I always with anything, with like cartoons with anything I watched ever, the episodes I always loved the most
were where gender was challenged, always. Like I remember the, my go-to example in my brain, when I’m doing this interview in my brain, you know what I mean—

**Niculescu:** [Laughter]

**Rosensweet:** And I’m asked there’s this Sponge Bob episode called Rock-A-Bye Bivalve where Sponge Bob and Patrick adopt a little like mollusk and Sponge Bob is the mollusk’s mother that was always my favorite Sponge Bob episode because I was like, oh my God, this is like amazing like before I even was applying it to myself really, I was like oh my God this is so interesting like I love this, I loved this episode, loved it, loved it, loved it. Then I also liked Power Puff Girls and Sailor Moon like I’m not, I think anime and manga are awesome but I’m not personally, like I don’t watch a lot of them but Sailor Moon was the only one I ever kept up with when I was a kid, which, again, you start laying things out like this and you’re like, oh yeah, you know what I mean.

**Niculescu:** Yeah, yeah.

**Rosensweet:** And I remember there was this movie I watched that no one I’ve ever talked to has heard of, it's called Zerophilia, have you ever heard of this?

**Niculescu:** No I haven’t.

**Rosensweet:** It’s this wild movie about, they find like in this person—I’m sure if I watched it now I would hate it but like, when I was like 14 or whatever when I watched it I sought it out but I didn’t usually seek out movies and again, environment of fear, my mother like put the fear of God in me about illegally downloading any data so I didn’t do that so I like... but I don’t know how I found this movie and I sought it out and it was basically a movie about like this, this AMAB individual has a Z chromosome and the Z chromosome allows this person to completely change genders like completely, like, like change their sex, like completely and this movie like rocked my world. I was like this is wild, I remember thinking at the time I was like if I could do that I totally would, you know what I mean, like when I was thirteen or fourteen or whatever and just watching it. But for some reason it was weird passive I was like I would totally do that, you know what I mean. That’s like a pretty significant thing to think about, you know what I mean, but—

**Niculescu:** Yeah, yeah.

**Rosensweet:** I sought that movie out and then of course I started watching Ru Paul’s Drag Race in Season 2 and like—

**Niculescu:** That was what year about?

**Rosensweet:** Um, 10? 2010? Maybe earlier than that.

**Niculescu:** But like late 2000s.
Rosensweet: Yeah, late 2000s. And of course that... oh God I still remember seeing like the promo for that and I was like, I know you cannot see what I just did—

Niculescu: [Laughter]

Rosensweet: My mouth was agape, that's what I mean. I was like I couldn't believe it, you know what I mean, I was like this is wild I was so excited, you know, and I remember I loved the movie To Wong Foo, I loved Priscilla and at the same time I also loved things like wrestling but of course, I'm sure anybody listening to this, if you don't know wrestling's drag, this is just true—

Niculescu: Yeah [Chuckling]

Rosensweet: And so now, of course even things like Sailor Moon and Power Puff Girls were subverting the trope of the male superhero like let's, we're reacting to this.

Niculescu: Yeah, yeah.

Rosensweet: Like I was literally just listening to a podcast about Sailor Moon too, so here's this, what a wonderful example of a female group of superheroes, I'm like that's super exciting I love Sailor Uranus, you know what I mean, and Sailor Uranus just for context is like the one who in the manga apparently, I didn't know this because I never read the manga but when Sailor Uranus would speak she would use, like in Japanese they have like masculine and feminine speech similar to in Spanish so like she would use masculine speech when speaking and she was always my favorite character in the anime and it's things like that and you start taking stock of all this, you're just going through the inventory of your life, you know what I mean, and you're just like oh, like I love I don't know, I thought Hedgewick changed my life when I saw it. And again some of these things if I saw them now I would probably have an issue with but certainly at the time when I found them, very, very transformative. Peaches is an artist who's always been very important to me, or not always, that'd be weird if I was like 3 months old I was like I love Peaches—

Niculescu: [Laughter]

Rosensweet: But for quite some time I've loved artists like Peaches, um, God yeah like, but again the reason I've had sort of an internal weirdness is that I love all of that stuff but at the same time I love video games and I love—like I have a weird, an absolutely ridiculous weird interest in like sea shanties, like I just love nautical culture.

Niculescu: Okay.

Rosensweet: But like the culture of the sea which is a deeply flawed culture but like I was super interested in that and, not that any of these things should be sectioned off for anybody but, you know, like high fantasy, like if I was interested in that, like I loved Tolkien and, you know what I mean, that's such a male heavy narrative and then when I look back on it it's just
like well, you know, like that's why I'm so delighted by finding people like Patti Harrison, for instance, like of course when I was a kid I loved some Monty Python but again, a group of men but like, to go back to what this project's doing, where are the people who are not cis gendered men doing things like that because they there but do I get to see them? No, you know what I mean so like and I, um... But that's not even the point I should be able to like have a queer trans feminine identity and feel like I can consume any media I want, you know what I mean, within reason, you know what I mean. I guess the point is that I've definitely seen a trend in the media I like but also like I really, at the same time, like some very traditionally masculine things and then also force myself to try to be into some traditionally masculine stuff. Oh wait a minute, okay there's this one thing, ah, okay, I... this isn't like a media thing I consumed but when I was like thirteen years old—twelve or thirteen years old—and MySpace was a thing, um MySpace kids, Google it—

Niculescu: [Laughter]

Rosensweet: So I made a MySpace profile with nothing on it that was just a female profile and her name was Amy Smith which, looking back, like that's so funny because that's about the most generic name—

Niculescu: Yeah. [Laughter]

Rosensweet: ... That you could ever hope to have and that profile's still knocking around out there somewhere, Amy Smith is still showing on MySpace [inaudible] and that’s it, you know what I mean and I know that's not gonna mean anything [inaudible] but I just thought of that and that was like a super weird and very specific memory I have of doing that and being like super excited when I did it but and told no one, you know what I mean but like—

Niculescu: Yeah, I mean like were you talking to anybody on MySpace through that profile?

Rosensweet: No, it wasn't even that I just wanted to have it—

Niculescu: Just like a presence.

Rosensweet: Yeah and I just wanted to be able, just like almost I couldn't decorate my room the way I wanted to but I could decorate a MySpace profile the way I wanted to so I was able to have like whatever profile background I want with like whatever stuff I wanted, you know what I mean, so I think it was kind of that, you know what I mean. But, yeah, that's just a super specific thing that I would be remiss not to mention but, yeah, like the queer stuff, and also villains had an appeal to me, you know what I mean and, again, I remember the first time this was really like brought to my attention was at a... this was actually at a meeting at the Queer Club at SUNY Purchase, but we were talking about villains and media and their connections to queerness and I was like wow like mind open like, a lot of villains are queer, you know what I mean and, no accident, but I always found villains pretty fascinating and I remember identifying heavily with the penguin in Tim Burton's Batman—
Niculescu: Oh, okay yeah.

Rosensweet: [Laughter] and loving Cat Woman too but specifically the penguin because he was like this person who hated his body and was ostracized for that and then wanted to just eat fish and then throw umbrellas at people and I was just I feel you honestly, I feel you, bite people’s nose off, I was like yeah me too, you know what I mean, and wore makeup so you know, the penguin’s a queen that’s what I’m saying.

Niculescu: Yeah. Okay so first I guess like kind of pretty imminent to a lot of things you were talking about and having had a conversation right before this, um, a lot of the like media things that were kind of like more explicitly queer were themselves like drag queens and so you’ve mentioned that you have done drag before—

Rosensweet: Yes.

Niculescu: And so I was wondering how that developed alongside but also in some ways maybe is different to the ways in which you’re talking about gender.

Rosensweet: Oh for sure, like that’s the thing I think it was kind of this thing where I was like, it was hard for me to really come to terms with the trans feminine identity because I’m like clearly I’m just a boy who likes boy things but who is also into some things that are rated as feminine and queer things you know what I mean, that must be what it is and then drag sort of affirms that in a way because you like, you can sort of be maybe a cis-gendered man who is interested in these similar things and I was like, I feel that’s what it is and I had this idea that I was like if I do drag I’m gonna sort it all out, I’m gonna have it figured out, you know what I mean, like, I’m gonna do drag and that’s going to be it. Because it’s not like I was super attracted to things that were, or like super interested in things that were like, I don't like saying like what things are feminine and what things are masculine. Maybe there's shows that would be on a checklist of like what makes you a more feminine person to some people and maybe I wasn't as interested in those so I was like well that can’t be it you know what I mean because I’m living in this binary world and there must be an explanation, you know what I mean, and I was like if I do drag I’m just going to sort all this shit out and that'll totally give me the answers to everything and I did drag and all I realized was that that wasn’t true and I did not, uh, it was not the answer to everything and in fact, the reason I think I was interested in a least male-bodied people who presented as feminine for so long was because ultimately that was what I knew I was but not just on a performative level but on a level of identity. Even to this day it’s like sometimes I’ll see—I don’t compare myself much to like female-bodied people or like cis-gendered women as much because I’m like—I don't know I think there's a level of self-deprecation there where I’m like well cause I can't cause I can't achieve that, you know what I mean. Because like I said I do have what I objectively know as a very male body in a lot of ways and that's frustrating and it’s the kind of thing where I’m like... but if I see like a male-bodied person who seems like they would have an easier time transitioning than I will or I would, I get super jealous about that, you know what I mean—

Niculescu: Oh yeah [Laughter]
Rosensweet: You know it's not cis-gendered women for me when I see like oh, you don't have a hair on your body, oh good for you!, you know what I mean, it's just like that kind of things so I think that's what it is, it's like I guess drag and its relationship to my gender identity for me it's like unfortunately I still in many ways see myself as a man.

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: And I do because it's brought to my attention literally constantly and I think on a certain level, seeing myself let's say as man in a dress like I know man in a dress that's such a buzz term but sometimes that's just how I would see myself and that's like all I can achieve, you know what I mean. And, not to take away the power of a man being in a dress or being a drag queen doing what they do because I love what drag artists do, I love what drag artists do, you know what I mean, but then there's still this thing where it's like, um... when I would present feminine at college and again this was a very positive environment and I'm not blaming anybody—

Niculescu: Yeah.

Rosensweet: When I would wear a dress out, no matter how drab or boring the dress was, I would always get compliments on it, always, and screaming compliments, you know what I mean and I think parts of that maybe stems from drag culture like there's that super enthusiastic support, which is great, but on the other hand, it's like in a weird way you're also kind of acknowledging that I'm not just living my life and I'm doing something that's like othered and—

Niculescu: Like it has some kind of entertainment value.

Rosensweet: Exactly, exactly. Because if a cis-gendered woman was wearing this exact same dress that I'm wearing there would be no fanfare about it, you know what I mean, but I'm wearing it so it's like a show, it's like exciting but really I'm just wearing what I feel like wearing today. So I think that drag is wonderful and it has helped me realize so much but I think its relationship to my identity at least is complicated because I'm not, my identity is not a drag queen, you know what I mean, that's not who I am, you know what I mean. And even now I don't want to particularly do drag anymore like, I did it and I figured out like that's not really, like I didn't want to do it because I wanted to be a drag, I did it because I wanted to be able to like feel validated in a feminine identity. And maybe that's true for a lot of people so maybe it's a great outlet in that way but it creates this issue where, well but my gender's not drag queen.

Niculescu: Yeah. Okay, so if you don't mind me backtracking a bit just to get some details—

Rosensweet: Not at all.

Niculescu: How, in what kind of spaces in which specific clubs, or types of performance sites were you doing drag?
Rosensweet: I didn’t do it much, I didn’t do it a lot because I kind of did and I was like this is a lot of work and I don’t, like, you know [Laughter] because it is.

Niculescu: Yeah, yeah.

Rosensweet: The first time I ever did drag was in high school and I basically was part of this like student-driven showcase of like comedy and I did drag for that, um, because obviously like deeply closeted trans person in high school doing drag for laughs, you know, but it was an opportunity for me and I was so excited, I remember I didn’t, and this of course was at the time when I was super thin, like really, really thin so I remember my costume teacher who was a drag queen in high school just like gave me some clothes. I didn’t want to take them off, obviously, you know what I mean. He had heels that fit me because he also has these very, very large feet and he had this really cool like BDSM skirt and had all this amazing shit and I was like, I’m good, like the number was over and they were like Danny you can like take it off now and I’m like, I’m good I’m just gonna chill for a minute, you know what I mean. And then obviously Halloween was always an opportunity but the first time I actually did a drag show was for my friend’s senior project and I performed as a persona—well, okay, cause again, I don’t like the term fishy and I don’t agree with it but I also knew that I could never live up to that ideal of a queen and so I went full comedy queen. I was named clown of classes and I dressed in basically a feminized clown suit, like a fully femme clown, clown with a “Q” and, um, basically lip-synched along to a song about having sex with literal flies and shit in a bowl and that was like the first time I ever did drag. And that was cool and I was like well that was fun but then I did my school’s drag ball and that’s when I was kind of like oh—

Niculescu: High school or—

Rosensweet: College, college at Purchase, Fall Ball which is an amazing drag show and the year I did it Milk and—oh my God I’m so mad at myself—but another queen from Drag Race were judging that year—

Niculescu: Oh wow.

Rosensweet: Which was super cool they both gave me perfect scores, was exciting—

Niculescu: Damn. [gasps, laughs].

Rosensweet: [Laughs]. But it was amazing I lip-synched to like, ah okay so I opened up lip-synching to the bagpipe part in Scotland The Brave and then I also did like a song by CL, I did a song by Chicks on Speed, I did a song by—there was a Madonna song there but I had a quota to fill, you know what I mean so—

Niculescu: Yeah [Laughter]
Rosensweet: I did Slay Bells and the Dragon Tale’s theme song which was really, it was eclectic, it was incredible, I poured a lot into this mix but then I was, no that wasn't, that didn’t, why am I excited right now, you know what I mean, like when I did the performance, getting ready for the performance was more fun for me than doing the performance, just having that moment, you know what I mean. And after that I decided to take up a performance art class where I was actually able to delve into this shit and honestly, like I think what really got me from thinking about this shit to doing something about this shit was my performance art class, like having the opportunity to talk about like very, very honestly and openly about not like... and ironically not in a very performative way just in a way that was like I could like, ya, like I had this whole spoken-word piece where I didn’t really do anything except basically say like I would love to just wear leggings and have a bun that kind of hangs messy on my head and like, forget to do my makeup one day and feel weird about it but then go do it later, you know what I mean, just basic things like that, and I was like, oh, this is bigger than drag. So the performance art class helps a lot ironically cause like that's technically performative but the way my professor set up the class it was not and, um, and like the drag was great, drag is fun, drag is cool, I love drag culture it's so fun to be a part of it I love going to those shows but it's not really what I want to be doing and thankfully there were things like I mentioned the Feminist Club and this performance art class and like very femme spaces where I could really work shit out. And an incredible group of friends who were also willing to talk to me about this stuff and like helped me feel comfortable not using male pronouns anymore and would honor my pronouns when like most people won't, you know what I mean, and will do it to the point where they will be militantly correcting other people and I so appreciate that because I still to this day can't do that for myself. And I get mad at people for not knowing and I can’t blame them but it’s like I have a very hard time correcting people cause, cause culture of fear and I don’t want to be in a position on anybody you know what I mean, but, yeah, it's amazing to have friends like that, I’m so lucky.

Niculescu: And so I guess, in talking about, maybe we can start to talk about your senior project?

Rosensweet: Sure.

Niculescu: And how that related to both your burgeoning interest in performance but also kind of like being with a community of people.

Rosensweet: Yeah, for sure. My senior project—Okay so when I went into college my major was script writing and specifically I wanted to focus on television writing and I was like I'm going to be a TV writer and that’s what I'm going to be, which is also kind of a lofty thing to say but I was like, but that’s what it’s gonna be and then I did it and the program is great, it wasn’t for me and it just wasn't capturing me the way I wanted to be captured so I changed my major to something that incorporated script writing along with media theory and media technology, I found a lot of roots to explore like queer theory and like anthropology and cool things like that in the process but even up to the very last moment, up until I was walking across the stage at graduation I still didn't know what the hell I was doing in college, at all—
Niculescu: [Chuckles]

Rosensweet: So my senior project frankly ended up being kind of a mess, I’m proud of it because of what I, sort of the seeds I planted. Is it a full piece? No but I’m proud of what I did and what I set myself up to do and basically the center piece of the project, I originally was going to have the center piece be my interviews and then the supplement sort of be a creative project and it originally was going to be a performance but I was like, I decided, like I couldn’t get the interviews that I wanted and I knew it wouldn’t be done soon enough and I was like I need something more so I decided instead of doing a performance to write a script, and the script was actually based on a nightmare I had shortly after... oh, what was it, I think it was actually after Danica Roem won the, what did she win in, was it Virginia, um shortly after that happened I had this nightmare about in the 2020 presidential election or in the wake of that, that there’s a civil war basically and like the coast split off and then the military takes control of the coasts and I had this nightmare that I was like three months into transition like had started taking hormones and then was forced to stop because, like I don't know, I couldn’t get access to that medication anymore, you know what I mean, and so that’s the pilot I ended up writing for my senior project, basically that nightmare sort of realized in script, that’s what I ended up doing as my center piece. My interviews ended up unfortunately having to be supplements, I wanted them to be like the main dish but unfortunately there wasn’t enough time or enough that I could do with them and I wasn’t able to get enough of them but I spoke to the friend I mentioned before who, she is an incredibly thoughtful and wonderful and hilarious person who I love and her name is Evelyn Richardson and she is like a burgeoning playwright and author and then I spoke to my friend Vook who is a transman in the process of producing his own film and, like real, with producers who bought his script and that was great, like talking to them was awesome and of course because I knew both of them and it was like super cool and we all knew each other pre-transition which is also interesting because it provides an interesting perspective or even pre, pre being out, forget pre-transition, and that was really good. And basically what I’m saying is like was it everything I wanted it to be and more, no it wasn’t what I wanted it to be and less but I also am intending now to and hope that I can—cause my original goal was to talk to comedians or nightlife entertainers, that’s what I wanted to do, um—

Niculescu: Who were trans.

Rosensweet: Who were trans, yes, yes and I even had this lofty idea that somehow I was going to be able to speak to Eddie Izzard who was also extremely influential for me but of course that did not happen, Eddie’s busy, you know what I mean [Laughter].

Niculescu: [Laughter]

Rosensweet: And so, basically my idea now is I would love to continue to try to do interviews with trans comedians and nightlife performers and put that into some sort of book form that could be consumed by maybe young people with similar inclinations to me who are like where are the people that are like, you know like if you’re living in Iowa or something I want you to have access to a piece of literature that you can read and be like there are people, there are
people you know what I mean, doing it, succeeding, living, loving, doing it and then like I also would like to start sort of like an online community where comedically-inclined trans and genderqueer folks can have a space to talk to each other and recommend shows and like meet up and show each other their material and things like that. And again, this goes to why this project is so important to me like there's a community and even though sometimes it feels very like disconnected when I'm trying to access people on Reddit or something like that, like here's very real examples of community and that's what I mean by planting the seeds like this is the stuff like, through doing my work at Purchase I can continue now and my advisor who was incredible has offered to support me and they're genderqueer individual as well and also a great person to know because they're like living a very successful and illustrious and amazing life as a genderqueer professor of color and publishing some like super important amazing things, you know, so like ultimately basically the way I framed it—

**Niculescu:** Do you mind just mentioning their name?

**Rosensweet:** Oh yes, I'm so sorry, look at what I'm, look at myself—

**Niculescu:** [Laughter]

**Rosensweet:** Shaka McGlotten, Shaka McGlotten, everyone should look up Shaka, they're incredible and, um, what is it, oh, um, I forgot what I was going to say.

**Niculescu:** Okay. Sorry about that.

**Rosensweet:** No, no, please don't be, don't be at all because I would rather you all know who Shaka is.

**Niculescu:** [Laughter]

**Rosensweet:** Yeah, so I would like to provide the connectivity, hopefully, in some capacity. It's the kind of thing where it's like I realize that I can't, I'm having a hard time like figuring out I guess what even I want to be doing really because I'm like I don't know if I can start my life until I like, you know, get over to the clinic and start working on that, you know what I mean. And there's a question I ask in my senior project where I'm like am I writing this because I want to or because I feel like I have to, you know what I mean. And it's very much a thing where it's like well it doesn't really matter because whether I want to or don't, I need to do this because I won't be able to live my life if I don't, you know what I mean, it's very much that kind of thing.

**Niculescu:** Yes, yeah. Okay so I guess we could just start thinking about, um, if you had anything left that you wanted to say or anything that I maybe missed?

**Rosensweet:** I don't know. And this is more like... I guess it's a journey. I spoke to a trans friend of mine who was like super helpful and I was like, you know, not that—I have been very afraid to take the steps I feel like I need to take to like go about what I'm doing in the most healthy way for me, like I went to a gender group therapy in college but I haven't pursued it outside of
college and that's something I'd like to do because there are questions I have that I am trying to answer by myself which is literally never going to work. But I was like I am doubting myself so hard and I was talking to a trans friend of mine who is medically transitioning and he was like, listen, I started taking hormones, went off for ten months because I wasn't ready, went back on, you know what I mean. The reason I'm mentioning that is because hearing that helped me a lot because I don't have to feel like transitioning is a linear thing, I can feel like it goes in any and all directions, it's not beginning-middle-end. I think the queer experience or queer to me rejects beginning-middle-end, it rejects the [inaudible] structure, it rejects structure do you know what I mean, that's what I love about it, and I include that in my experiences about being someone who is very early in like beginning to transition and whatever that means but I know I am not the Bar Mitzvahed man that I was set up to be, that's not who I am I can say that with confidence. Where I go from there is like, um, I work on figuring it out but just to know, to speak to another trans person and have that person say like yeah like I didn't know either, you know what I mean, it was hard for me to figure it out too and acknowledge the fact that like this is the heavy stuff that is not given much support was like so helpful to me. And also just to be someone who like doesn't fit the—this is not to sound judgmental at all, like if a trans person wants to sort of like live their life in perhaps what you'd call a more binary way, that's wonderful, I am so for that and I hope they feel validated and loved and are living the best life they can possibly live, it's just not who I am you know what I mean, and that's usually the narrative I see and that's I think usually the narrative most of us see and so to feel outside of that is sort of anxiety-inducing, you know what I mean, because it's like, can this work. But that's why, again, I said this to Michelle, I want to seriously say this to you now thank you for doing this work because those narratives are so important.

Niculescu: Now you are a part of it, now [inaudible]

Rosensweet: Yeah, and I'm like so grateful and thankful, and like you know blessed because I just am so happy to provide other perspectives, not that there's anything wrong with the current perspectives on what it is to be a trans person but there's way more than one way to do that and I think I was made to feel for a long time that that wasn't true and that's why I'm glad to contribute to the proliferation of a more well-rounded and multi-faceted and complex and fascinating and a beautiful narrative and I hope to be a part of that, I guess literally one of the only things I can say in my life with some level of certainty but I hope to be able to do that and hope to do that for the rest of my life, you know.

Niculescu: I think that's a really beautiful place to end so thank you so much.

Rosensweet: Thank you.