NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

SIMONE KOLYSH

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Transcribed by Shauna Lodi (volunteer)

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #108

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello, my name's Michelle O'Brien and I will be having a conversation with Simone Kolysh [Simone Kolysh confirming pronunciation of last name] for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is February 14, 2018, and this is being recorded at the CUNY [City University of New York] Graduate Center.

Simone Kolysh: Happy Valentine's Day [laughs].

O'Brien: Happy Valentine's Day. How are you doing today?

Kolysh: I'm doing well, thanks. It's a pleasure to do it with you in particular.

O'Brien: Yeah. I am very excited to hear about your life. Umm, what's your first memory?

Kolysh: My first memory is of my mother letting go of me and me drowning in an ocean somewhere around the Balkan Sea, uh Seas you know, and um feeling like I'm just gonna die [laughs]. That's my first memory, of losing that connection to her, and feeling alone and lost, um, maybe around four, or three or four years old.

O'Brien: What's your mother like?

Kolysh: My mother, is a complicated individual and I have a complicated relationship to her. She lives with me, so I can speak to you about what she's like, because my childhood memories of her are limited, and I remember that she would tell me the norms of all sorts are very important to maintain. So whenever I would have a lot of questions as a child, she'd kind of always, instead of answering, say that that's because that's the norm and that's because that's our tradition and it was a very blanket sort of statement. I never got answers to the certain things that I wanted to know about, and then I felt that, you know, she was there for me because she sacrificed a lot of her life, to like make sure that... I would live in a Russian village and I would want to learn the English language and then she got another job so that I could have a private tutor in order to do that, and I knew education was important to my mother and that she would support my like, you know, development, but then the next thing I remember is just when we would be moved here to the United States and she was working hard and wasn't really there to process how emotional or drastic that is to just take a kid and move them across the world and drop them into an entirely new country and so I felt alone again and I tried to come forward with some sort of, um, like childhood sexual abuse, uhh, conversations and what has been done to me by certain people and then I remember her saying, and this was the beginning of how we came to be apart [laughter] emotionally, that, um, it didn't happen, so she sort of continues, to this day, to sort of rewrite my story as I try to tell it, and she was as an immigrant to the United States really invested in making sure we follow the norms here too and learn the norms and she would fake Thanksgiving Dinner just to say that we're Americans. She would fake a lot of things to this day just to appear to Americans as if we're also American. And so she had a set of ideas of what that means, and so the norms continued regarding sexuality or gender or how to interact with people and family and so I just remember learning all of her
norms, which I guess isn't, they just sort of fit a lot of other people's norms so sometimes I tell my students, you know if I ask my mother something and I ask a bunch of you something, it gives me a good way of triangulating, like, where social norms are, you know, across a wide range of ages, because if she dislikes it and you dislike it, then, that's pretty clearly a deviant behavior, or something.

**O'Brien**: Spoken like a sociologist

**Kolysh**: Well sure, yes.

**O'Brien**: [laughter] So, where did you grow up?

**Kolysh**: I grew up in uh, Azerbaijan which was at the time a country that belonged to USSR and when the USSR collapsed it was pretty impactful for my parents, but also at that time Azerbaijan and Armenia where having conflicts over a piece of land between the countries and, I'm thirty-four years old, and they continue to have that conflict to this day then Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, you can Wikipedia it. And that meant that people who were of Armenian descent, like me I'm Russian-Armenian, had to leave the country drastically and like fast, because there were militia sort of kind of following down the block and like murdering people who are Armenian. And then in Armenia they were doing the same to people who were of Azerbaijani descent, so it was sort of you know a tit for tat kind of thing and so, the first time I was moved was very suddenly and I had to let go of this life-sized doll I had. It had a wedding dress on it was my first serious trauma because I had to let her go too. [laughter] And then they, they just kind of took us to Russia which is where I lived and then established roots there and went to school and was a happy child because of schooling, which is how it's going to connect to why I'm forever in school now and then they just sort of let me know that we're moving to the United States now because we won the green card lottery and the next day that was when we left again and I didn't get too much of a warning, so I ran away into the forest and they found me and [laughter] I thought this was gonna, you know, let me stay in Russia [laughter]. And they found me and they took me and the next thing I knew I was in JFK [airport] here in New York, um...and now I forget what the question was.

**O'Brien**: How old were you when you moved?

**Kolysh**: Eleven. So when I showed up to JFK I was eleven and I was relied on to translate everything because of the previously mentioned English lessons, but I learned British English instead of American English and so there was a lot of misunderstanding because I would use different words, you know like for elevator I would say flat or something, and um, but I got us around the airport enough, you know, at eleven then became, you know, the main translator for the family, uh, forever after that [laughter] and am to this day. So....

**O'Brien**: Do you want to pause the recording to eat?

**Kolysh**: No, I will eat on the recording, very good. I think that sounds good.
O’Brien: That sounds great. I want you to eat. [eating noises] Umm... what, when you ran away to the forest, what do you think your image of the United States was?

Kolysh: Yeah. So, I thought that, what they said it’s good to go to the United States because I could go to Disneyland. And I didn’t know what Disneyland was but we had some movies that we would see as children, mostly Commando [O’Brien laughs] and the one with Sylvester Stallone, Rambo, and stuff with Jean-Claude Van Damme. So, so that didn’t give me too much of a picture of what the United States was like, I just knew that I didn’t want to leave my home and my friends behind and I just developed a very new crush on my best friend, this boy Maxim, and it was a tragedy that I was leaving when I was finally starting to like come into my own [laughter]. And that’s all I just wanted to stay there because I thought my parents didn’t understand what a loss that would be. I didn’t think anything of America other than it would take me away from my friends and my crush and I had very specific plans on becoming a doctor and I knew which hospital, and so this was just it was just you know, um, not in keeping with my strict schedule [laughter] at eleven years old [laughter], but when I did come here, I remember being shocked by how many choices people had in soda and soda was something we could only have on New Year’s as well as chocolate and when I went to grocery stores in Brooklyn I just couldn’t believe that anyone can have chocolate anytime they wanted and it was affordable and that there was so many different kinds of soda, I thought, and it was profound at the time, I thought why would people need so many choices of a product? I feel like that’s wasteful and you know, now here with my very Marxist stance, I still agree with that kind of thing [laughter].

O’Brien: What was the soda like, in Azerbaijan?

Kolysh: It was the same soda

O’Brien: Yeah?

Kolysh: It was just imported, yeah it as just so difficult to get you know either in Azerbaijan or in Russia because we were, well in Azerbaijan probably easier but I just don’t remember consuming it there ‘cause my parents were relatively well off there once they moved the first time they were not well off and so that’s why it was only during New Years that we could get it, but they would have to go to the big city next to the village where it would, where they could obtain something like that, yeah, which is why it was not manageable I think the rest of the year.

O’Brien: What was life like for your family when you first moved to the United States?

Kolysh: I first moved to Pennsylvania actually, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and that’s where our sponsor family lived and I thought my upbringing was going to be like a private school existence and, um, you know in a very elite environment. And then my father had an injury and it forced us to move to Brooklyn and it was a very different environment where I felt better ‘cause I didn’t really get along with a lot of people in Harrisburg [laughs]. So when I moved to Brooklyn and I went to middle school as a sixth grader I was just, I was just mad that I had to
take, to take a year over. In Russia, I was finished with seventh grade, here they said its only based on the age of your birth, I mean the year of your birth and I said but I'm very advanced, like, you can’t put me back, so I just, that’s what, that was a concern. I remember writing these really impressive nationalist patriotic poems about Mother Russia, like calling it that in Russian, I still have books and books of this and that's because I was actually, you know, brought up as an officially communist kid. We wore the little Lenin buttons, we, well I didn’t make it to eight grade which is where you start to have the red handkerchiefs around your neck and you were called pioneers. So, the communist ranks basically, um, I didn't get to go through all of that so I had a very nationalist agenda writing that poetry about how Mother Russia would win everything and every war and across the universe. I had a great sense of that kind of pride [laughs]. And I thought that education was super important and so I'm going to excel at it and no matter what happens I'll just be a really good student and you know, I led a very lonely existence, but I wanted to be part of a friend group and so, became friends with people that I thought were cool, but were actually mean girls, and so I remember just bullying a lot of other people when I was in sixth grade in order to, you know, be cool. And I teach my kids and my students now to this day that those actions are so important and so harmful to reflect on because you can’t go back and apologize for something like that so it's probably best to never bully or harass another person since you never know what impact you'll have on them and I just wish I could come back to a couple of girls and just really apologize for just being a little shit [laughs] in a sense. So that was my first year here, and there was like I said another instance of sort of sexual molestation taking place from an older person that was being ignored by my parents and so I dealt with it privately however, whatever, I never really dealt with it. Since the people who need to deal with it deny it happened you can never really get closure around something like that and my school experience was difficult because I was very poor and I didn't have jeans and if you didn't wear jeans at the time it was just kind of like not a cool thing and so they beat me up a lot in school and they made fun of my glasses, you know, and my brother had to take me to school and I hated that 'cause he was very manipulative and he was five years older and he was not interested in walking me and I just think he just tortured me a lot. So that was the initial years and I just remember no one really processed anything for me, which I think was necessary, so I pay close attention to that with my children now to process change.

O’Brien: You brought up this, these instances of child sexual assault that you dealt with and the denial from your parents. Is there more that you wanna share about that? It's totally up to you.

Kolysh: Yeah, I mean I think, you know we come across just how common that sort of experience is in my interviewing my Ph.D. participants, in talking to my students, in talking to my friends, and I think it's an incredibly common experience for people that are assigned female at birth, but by no means just that group, uh, certainly just, um, it's actually how I now think about folks coming into womanhood pretty violently and without their permission and, or coming into sexuality prior to their being ready like, at ages that are not, that are not thinkable really. So, I think I've processed it quite a bit, you know, since being eleven or twelve or thirteen, uh, and I can’t confront one of the folks because he’s passed, and, uh, I did confront the other person, a little bit, and you know like I said, along with my parents he’s sort of said that’s not what happened. And so I let that go because I was much younger, I wouldn’t now,
but I have no interest whatsoever in confronting the person, I've basically moved on as much as you can from that sort of thing. And I don't think it shaped, hmm, but how could it not, but I don't think it shaped significantly my exploration or whatever, I did feel fear and shame and I do get upset when I think to that little person you know, when needed...that validated so now I just pay attention to other people's experiences and validate it for them.

**O'Brien:** And what, what would you say to little you?

**Kolysh:** [inaudible] It's good advice to talk to your younger self in order to heal, but I would say, well of course it happened and it was wrong and they will be punished and, like, we will leave this environment and it's not going to be tolerated, you know, just things I don't think many parents know how to state without apology or question mark to their children, just sort of, you know, categorically validate and just, stop something and intervene and, and whatever, so that's the kind of parent I want to be and am, so I informed my parenting, you know, to this day.

**O'Brien:** So you spent your teenage years in Brooklyn?

**Kolysh:** That's right [laughs], yeah, I had the best time. I keep thinking to high school, because middle school was a mess but I switched middle schools after being, having a bad experience in that other one initially and then the second middle school I went to is where my son goes now, so it's really special, it's doubly special, but I, you know, became, I learned Italian and the violin and just like had all these other crushes and was [aristin and arkon], you know, part of service societies and uh, things got better the more engaged I got with school and the less engaged I got with my family, which was very painful, but the more I separated myself from their upbringing and their norms, and the more I got into things that people do, you know like extracurricular activities, hobbies, you know, just, uh, um, things that people do for fun the better my life got and in high school I was so active and I was, I was getting a special med-sci diploma and I was doing cancer research and I was choreographing and directing musicals every year and I was just organizing other things, I was coming into my feminism, I think that was my first rhetorical move, like, into feminism 'cause Bush was president and abortion was compromised, as always, but I finally recognized it as under threat and so became an activist, a feminist, I think that's such a typical story that we come into feminism through reproductive rights frameworks, especially for white folks, and that was me. And I just remember having a great time in high school and in Brooklyn being just the best place for me and in fact I got into Stuyvesant [High School], which is the dream of all immigrant parents and, um, and said I didn't get into it so that I could go to Midwood High School in Brooklyn to be with my friends and my parents, not being too involved, or too aware of what I was doing, felt terrible that I didn't get into Stuyvesant, but didn't care and didn't know that I lied. So, now thinking back to that people say “My god what were you thinking?” You know, Stuyvesant, like people spend so much of their life and money and time trying to get into these specialized schools and I said yeah, but I at least had the best time in high school and got to be, what I think is an overly involved teenager but a teenager nonetheless and I did a bunch of other highly questionable and illegal things throughout high school and was this kind of kid who like, did cancer research at night and dealt drugs during the day and like avoided the cops and avoided my parents, oh and I
danced pretty regularly with a troupe, a dance troupe until I was eighteen and that was at like small Russian restaurants and all over Brighton Beach and it was just a really weird experience but, um, you know it gave me like a well-rounded existence from the years of fourteen to seventeen or whatever.

O’Brien: What part of Brooklyn did you live in?

Kolysh: This is, uh, you know, strictly Bensonhearst where I live now, Bensonhearst, uh, and uh, you know, would hang out in Brighton Beach, Sheepshead Bay, Flatbush, just, um, I kept pretty insular in a way because my parents made me afraid of the city initially, like all parents do, and they say you shouldn’t go and they constrain movement so I never actually went to Manhattan all that much and I stayed in the Russian community in Brooklyn, um, which I think delayed my sexual [laughs] development, but I, um, came out as bisexual at twelve or rather, because I didn’t know English all that well, my peers labeled me as bisexual after they saw me kiss a girl or kiss, or a girl kissed me and they were like, “Oh how could you do that?” and I said oh, how could I not, I mean like, she kissed me, I enjoyed it, something like that and they were like “that means you’re bi” and I was like, I don’t know what that means but what I knew was that the next day they stopped being friends with me and so I had to go and look the word up [laughs] and that didn’t tell me why people would stop being friends with you so I learned the word and I was like okay whatever, if that’s what that is, that’s what that is but I didn’t know why people disliked so much and so went into high school and joined, like, the gay straight alliance and like took a girl to the prom and just like wanted to be really out there with my bisexual identity...uh, and I think that if I was in Union Square sooner [laughs] I would have gotten, you know, my out and proud thing going faster, um, but it, but still what I want to say is there are a lot of us that exist in immigrant communities from a very young age or whatever age and we’re out there just existing in different circles than usually is tagged by LGBTQ, um, you know, lives like Union Square, or Village, the Piers, I never got to do a lot of that until I went to NYU [New York University].

O’Brien: Did you ever hear about or cross paths with LGBT people in the Russian immigrant community in Brooklyn you were a part of?

Kolysh: No, it’s so weird. Ask me about that later because the first time I made the connection between my Russian-Armenian identity and being LGBTQ and organizing, as those two things was this year, only, in my entire life I never made a link between my immigrant status and my sexuality or my gender or my feminist politics, which is just, I mean, I just, um, it shocked me this year that I, it took [laughs] me that long to like figure that out. Um, but no I never met a whole lot of other LGBTQ people and I was, my friend group just thought that it was ridiculous that I was bisexual and one of them was like, like a married lesbian now for many many years so I think, I always joke how could you not be okay, you know and now you’re queer and almost all of them are now [laughs] I was just I guess maybe the first one, so when I finally did go to the city I, I am such a cliché and I did enter NYU as a school I had this great awakening and this great epiphany and I and you know like met a transgender person during a retreat for Outspoken which is NYU’s LGBTQ peer education group so we were, I don’t know if they still go on retreats, but we went on a retreat and that is when people had to go around the circle
and come out and um this person was like I'm a trans person I'm a trans woman and I was like what is that 'cause just like terms and words mean a lot to me and I didn't know it and someone had to whisper it to me and I was like oh that is fascinating just found it endlessly fascinating and I was that horrible horrible person who would then like follow her around that whole time being like you know you must tell me everything about what this means and about gender and your existence and she is still my friend somehow to this day but honestly the patience I think that she had to possess she is an older than me and also went to my high school actually but not at the time I was there the patience that this person provided me and offered me throughout the years was immense and she also a conversation with this person led me to discover my own like trans identity a couple years after that so as soon as I found her endlessly fascinating and she like took care to explain things to me and we had an interaction where I was like playfully fighting with her and like touching her chest and she said like you know it's a private area don't do that because we were just friends and I was like but those aren't really breasts like they're not really breasts like my breasts are breasts and she was like no they are my breasts and I was like OK so I remember going home and this was such a moment where I looked in the mirror and I said OK at the time I changed my name so my name was Elena initially so I was speaking to myself in Russian anyway so I was uh like look Elena [Exhales] there is nothing that um breasts on your body have to do really with what makes a woman and so I looked and I was like you have to know that is true because it doesn't make any sense otherwise and I was like OK so what makes a woman like having a conversation with the mirror Elena is it somebody's capacity to give birth and I was like none of the woman in my family have a uterus any longer so clearly it is not that so um is it the way um you know the way they get married or like have kids you know beyond biology just that they mother no well that can't be it because like there is childless woman and like single people [laugh] so I was like so you know and along that those lines I learned along intersex folks too so I couldn't really tell myself maleness or femaleness either and I like ok so now you don't have an answer for why you are a woman and then it was a much more interesting shift where I was like OK I don't actually know if I am a woman because I can't answer my own question, I can't answer the line that I think is easy for other people to answer which is I am a woman because... Fill in the blank. You know plenty of people can give me thousands of reasons to put at the end of that sentence and when I couldn't I said ok well then this is something you then have to think about more deeply and privately I thought immediately again to retreat instead of seeking let's say other folks who can teach me I retreated for about three years internally being like I'm just going to privately talk this over with myself and see like if it's like it's a real thing and you know I was like getting more and more educated and I was you know like the head peer educator for so many years and it really wasn't until I was trying to figure this time out for the interview until I was like twenty-five or twenty-six that I publicly sat on a panel as part of trans community it was a live out loud panel at Judson memorial church where we go now for all the vigils for trans victims of homicide and transphobia so so that was so much more difficult of a coming out then like being bisexual or like I took up the identity of queer of course after learning about Judith Butler and queer theory and how many different people there are I was like we should all unite under the label of queer, I was that nightmare I was somebody who thought that labels [laughs] were divisive and perhaps in solidarity with other people we should all be universally queer and I swear to you there was a night we all played spoons at NYU and after that night a gay man and a trans woman and me a bisexual woman at the time decided we would all use the word queer starting the
next morning and henceforth and just sort of in order to be in solidarity with one another and so for the next ten years I used the word queer and that wasn't a difficult you know shift or anything I just really resented people who maintained words like bisexual or lesbian or something attached to them and it was just the weirdest battle um and as early I mean as late as my first year of the second graduate school the degree I am getting right now I mean it's been seven years but it's still kind of embarrassing you know like when I took intro to queer studies here as a graduate student and um a younger person said she's a lesbian I was like gosh how archaic must it be to rely on terminology that's like so outdated [laughs] and and I feel like I probably had a crush on her that I was sort of in denial because I thought she was so cool and I thought she was so powerful and I don't remember her name I know she was documentarian of the um disappearing queer bars in New York City and she was talking about some bar in Brooklyn that was closing or being evicted or something and I was just like gosh she is so fabulous but why lesbian that's just like for old people and like I wish she recognized the impact of queer theory [laughs] and queer politics and I just it's so embarrassing it must be told because people's identities and knowledge evolve and we have to account of how we were ignorant and just and and you know and just because we shift our labels around doesn't mean they aren't valuable to people when they choose them it's just it's you know when I say that I identified as bisexual then queer and then lesbian I don't want anybody to think that's kind of like a progression with we should follow I just I just think it served its purposes based on the options that I had available to me at the time in terms of language but I held preconceived notions that I think are harmful about that and so I teach my students that you know in ten years you'll think very differently about gender and sexuality than perhaps you do now in terms of labels and whatever, so don't don't you know don't um limit what people can use to describe themselves and self-author themselves and you know of course that I'm hoping that I will continue to grow around this subject.

O'Brien: Eat your sushi

Kolysh: Thank you [eating noises]

O'Brien: So, you were at NYU as an undergraduate.

Kolysh: mmhmmm and as a Masters student

O'Brien: Oh, what was your Masters program?

Kolysh: Public health

O'Brien: Why did you go into public health?

Kolysh: I was going to be a doctor remember as a child and so I was premed at NYU and continuing to do pretty hard, hard science quote unquote biological research and um I thought that in order to be a doctor one should also be pretty informed in public health matters you know and it would mean make me more um competitive for med school my MCAT was average [laugh] at best, my grades were ok [inhales] so I went into a Masters program at NYU and um
that is when my dreams of med school were shattered because I learned more and more about
the way health care is administered in this country and I just thought I cannot be part of this
kind of system, one that denies intersex people the right to autonomy one that like
discriminates based on race, or class and I was going to be like the smartest doctor ever like
House M.D. for sure. For sure. And [laughs] I said even if I have all the answers diagnostically
like people would be prevented from-from-the genius of my diagnosis because they can't
afford the medication I can't be a doctor in this kind of system like I can't achieve greatness
[inhales] as a physician when I'm constrained by social inequality [laughs] ok. So so I told my
parents just like with Stuyvesant that I um that I didn’t get into med school. But to the truth is
that I applied on the very last day and I know all the pre meds would—would—would like really
freak out right now because you can't apply on the last day of your of your um med school
application, that is sabotage you know you should apply like clearly four years before so
[inhales] so I self-sabotaged myself, got my Masters degree um and I became a parents for the
second time and um my hu-partner at the time lost his job suddenly and I realized that I have a
skillset that is marketable and like at one point went to do adult work you know as a patient
navigator for terminally ill cancer patients in Brooklyn at two different hospitals and I did that
work until I utterly burnt out...um... Because that kind of social inequality that I learned about
in an abstract way during grad school I was able to see right before my eyes as people died
because they simply could not afford you know the...the... inordinate copay that comes with
weekly shots after chemo or radiation or something and I just cried every day and um [laughs]
and I said I can't do this anymore and I burnt out and that is how I applied for a Ph.D. program
in sociology, and got accepted and shifted gears um to become a professor so that I could
interrupt people’s development at an earlier stage than my own kind of and no matter the
career path they take inform them of like what they can expect realistically and how to change
the world of course, why else would we be professors [laughs].

O’Brien: When you started at graduate school here at CUNY—so you would come out as trans
before then?

Kolysh: That is right, just a little bit before and one part of my social transition um was changing
my name from Elana to Simone and I named myself after Simone de Beauvoir because that is
how arrogant I am and the second sex changed my life and I feel like I’m such a trope there too
but that is the truth of it. So I changed my name and interestingly people still say why would
you choose a girl’s name if you are nonbinary shouldn't you pick something like Alex or you
know Jaime something gender neutral and-and I said well because it didn't matter what the
gender of the name was but what the ideas of the person that you know I named myself after are about and you know I thought she was pretty fabulous at the time so uh right before
entering grad school I changed my name because I said if I’m going to publish, and I have
published before the scientific research that I did to the biology research and I said if I am going
to publish about what I want to do work around I want you know I want the name changed and
I changed my first name and last name you know to have a new name I guess and then that was
part of my sort of gender transition.

O’Brien: How did you settle on your last name?
Kolysh: I well my initial last name was uh Armenian Arakelian and because of the climate that we lived in my parents divorced and changed our last name to my mother’s which was Kolychkina so um it was actually Kolyshkina in Russia but as immigrants come here the uh authorities decide to misspell their names in any number of ways and so they changed it to a CH in the middle of the root of the of the last name so in changing my name to Kolysh I took the root back the root of what my mother’s last name was actually and just took off the INA ‘cause people have trouble pronouncing it and I understood fully the reasons not to, not to de-Russiafy my name but just to establish a name of my own and I just wanted the root of it like the radical of it, yeah.

O’Brien: What were your relationships with ... What were your relationships like with trans communities in New York when you started graduate school?

Kolysh: Yeah, so ... So it’s strange to come out at a panel on trans identities but no one really knew they thought that I was already in the know and so what it required was a slight shift from my sort of queer organizing to see if I could like do tran-specific work because as you know LGBTQ organizing often erases trans people from their agenda and from their work and so you have to be more concrete in searching for you know organizations or people that service or work with trans people so I think I did that more academically like when creating my path here in in the graduate school you know in-in demanding information and demanding how to-how to improve my research or any of my classes that I took I would demand that kind of knowledge around so it was academic [O’Brien coughs] in a sense that I wanted to locate myself in the literature and then theorizing and so that-that exposed me to the field of trans studies um and then I started to look for icons you know of trans activism I guess or when I started developing simple courses in women's studies or LGBTQ studies I was - I went and searched for people that are I guess in the mainstream eye and then for people who are not in the mainstream eye. And so sort of but sort of what I did with my gender journey was parent in an entirely new way in the eyes of my mother or my community which is that as soon as I realized this truth about myself I shifted gears and my parenting to not gender my children in any way and I was already kind of questionable about that with my first son which I had in a- in my first marriage um during college but I wasn’t strong enough to resist my cultural upbringing or my mother’s talons, her gender talons in my son but by the time I had my second child and a second husband uh I said that there will be no more gendering of children and I will retroactively de-gender the previous child or allow for his expression to be as full and varied as possible because I think she already got some of her ideas you know into his head uh and this middle child continued to be like wonderfully gender non-conforming uh you know sort of making those decisions on her own but at the time this child according to other people was a boy and so it’s-it’s interesting that the stronger and more certain I got and got rooted into the trans community or or organizing or even learning about it the freer I became in my parenting and the more gender non-conforming my children became... Um so much so that at some point a couple years back at the transgender health conference which I recommend everyone attend if possible uh you know my child came back from the gender camp for kids uh the gender-free camp whatever gender just the camp for kids at the trans health conference and said that she is a girl and I said really that is interesting I always thought that you would be like a nonbinary person sort of like myself or like a I thought for all my kids you know I didn't think you know that she pick
something but uh I mean as soon as she said it I was like that's cool like do you need me to get you different clothes 'cause like they already had like different kinds of clothes, clothes for different genders available to them so I didn't think I needed to like change her wardrobe or whatever but I was like but just in case since you know since I never really bought things that are pink or frilly all that much you know that's just because of my own aesthetic um I said do you need something to be the girl that you are I said but just also you should know that um girls can be anything that girls are so like you don't have to have a certain kind of hair you don't have to have a certain you know whatever and I never cut my kids hair anyway regardless of what gender they identify as so so that didn't change and she was like I don't know maybe buy me some dresses like that are not costumes and that are like maybe this kind of color or whatever and so we went to Children's Place and um I relied on my network of like queer and trans folks just emailed everyone on and was like Ark is a girl and um I need money because I am poor and if you can give just give like ten—fifteen bucks so I can like you know allow her to figure out like how she wants to look that would be great and I have a good network of queer family like queer kinship to rely on and there was a tremendous outpouring I think in my direction of just a few people but everybody was like really invested in just sort of helping my child figure out their-their-their identity and so it's sort of been like that for a couple years and I just reached out to Sophie Labelle who's Ark's favorite trans author of children's books and reminded Sophie who's facing constant harassment and death threats globally that she met our kids a couple years back and she's still Ark's favorite author and that there's a special connection that exists in time between her remaining strong and her remaining here and my child remaining happier because she's here and Sophie just found it on Facebook and was like that's really sweet and you know, so it was through my children that I both was seen as a gender because they didn't learn gender too much until preschool or whatever. They would give me moments [clears throat] of recognition as a nonbinary person because they wouldn't really make any assumptions about me as a person, ah, and of course when they would go to school they'd learn and they'd be like mommy you're a girl and I'd be like mommy's not a girl and people who are talking to you about this don't really understand gender [laughs] and they need to be reeducated but um we know better here in this house you know it's not just girls and boys anyways it's like a lot of different kinds people and genders, so through parenting I was able to get the satisfaction of being seen and the satisfaction of encouraging my children on their journey and the oldest in response to I think harassment and whatever cut his hair and then my middle child the girl didn't cut her hair and then the third who's four as a result of him being my third in a sense he's the most confident of them all to in resisting um and in a very kind of um neutral way just not aggressively or anything he'll just kind of tell his peers at preschool like if they say you shouldn't have nail polish on he'll be like but I like it [laughs] and I think it's very disarming to to just hear that because it's true and you don't have to get into it [laughs] it's because he likes it and like that's what gender is it's because you like it that you feel the things you feel and wear the stuff you want and get the changes you need because you like it and I don't think it needs to be any more complicated than that to be affirmed. That's it [laughs].

O'Brien: Tell me about how trans studies has changed during your time in doing trans research -

Kolysh: [talking over O'Brien] Yeah, I was credit um-
O'Brien: [inaudible] - academic.

Kolysh: - Julia Serano’s Whipping Girl the book with um whipping me into shape about my internalized sexism, um she's the first author I think of when I think of trans studies and then goes you know Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah and like you know a lot of other people...um but I learned of the term um trans-misogyny and um Moya Bailey's term for misogynoir affecting women that are black and just trans misogynoir you know what affects trans women that are black to understand who are the most impacted who are the most impacted members of our community as trans people but I remember thinking that for the longest time I held ideas about femininity that were deeply harmful and that I was one of those girls growing up that said I'm not like other girls and reading Julia Serano's work about how femininity no matter who embodies it is devalued just universally helped me shift gears internally and see that everything that's tagged feminine is actually quite radical of um an embodiment to take up and and to shift my politics so trans studies begins with me recognizing that no matter where you look masculinity is truly privileged in queer communities too and that like it takes some time to realize that it's more radical in a way to be a queer femme-identified person than it is to be a uh more I guess butch-identified person I really dislike the language as well but it exists and it gets circulated uh and we have to deconstruct it so then of course I read all of the more personal accounts you know like Leslie Feinberg and Pat Califia and just like a lot of my students' words about their lives you know 'cause I started asking them to journal you know kind of like what an archive does but to journal slowly throughout the semester to learn of how other trans people understand who they are and those personal accounts changed me too um because I realized that there's truly a multitude of the way people can be and so I remember really just there's so many harmful elements that trans studies I think helped me um dis-um just sort of um dispense with one being that I saw trans women at NYU that were according to me pretty gender conforming and I remember thinking why would she wear pearls when they are so associated with women um thereby reinforcing the gender binary like she should have a more radical appearance or something which really smells like TERF logic right now [laughs] and uh well it wasn't like a biological essentialism I was nevertheless essentializing the idea of womanhood and what that looks like and now learning about the violence that trans people face trans women in particular learning about the constant harassment the constant discrimination sort of the oppression of daily life. I can't believe I ever thought that trans people simply choose their appearance in the first place as if they are free to be who they are [laughs] no they are not but even when they do to receive criticism from someone like me or anyone else about how they chose to be on a daily basis it just makes me embarrassed for how-how I thought so it-it the multitudes of it helped me see that um that no one trans person's expression or gender presentation um you know is like the end all be all and shouldn't that is why I've-I value this project because we need all the narratives you know like there is an issue with a single story right and presenting a single image and whatever so that's it.

O'Brien: How has it been being a nonbinary person in trans studies?

Kolysh: [exhales]...you know, I think in all the work that I do I-uh and as confident as I am in prioritizing my needs and myself, you know, I let it go on the back burner that I should affirm
myself in spaces as a nonbinary person or demand correct pronoun usage or whatever, I kind of take a backseat to making sure other people are affirmed and then if they [laughs] get the right pronouns for me that's nice, but like, I don't expect anybody to because I'm perceived on a daily basis or quote-unquote "pass" as a woman, so then there's two things that are ongoing all the time, one is perception and one is self-identity and I'm sure everyone can relate [laughs] so I have to deal in, with the world as someone that experiences sexism and sort of oppression because of how I'm perceived and also the erasure of my actual identity on a daily basis, um, and both of these things really enrage me, but I think the second one that I am nonbinary, that I am a agender didn't take precedence until maybe this year or a couple years and the more I meet people who are nonbinary in social media spaces or in general any spaces, they inspire me to become a little louder and it would be strange to them because I'm so loud and so out there about certain things they can't really believe I'm not affirming myself, um, so they're like it's okay to demand this or its okay to, to think these things or worry about this stuff or, or whatever it's okay, so I have one friend who is an alum of this graduate program, um, who whenever I post a photo [laughs] always makes sure to say you look really agender today, and I have another friend who is a bit less supportive who always says, I just don't see it, you know, you're like really feminine, and I say actually, and you're wondering why I'm friends with this person, but anyway, [laughs], uh, it's a work in progress I guess, and so I say actually I can see why you say that because I do look like a girl, but what that other person is providing me with is, like, actual authentic validation because they know who I am and if you're denying that then you're denying me my own identity, right, so like, even if it doesn't look agender to you, whatever photograph you're seeing, it's about the person and like, their truth, right, so you know, even if I know that person is just saying it to say it I still appreciate it because it's like their...way of saying I love you [tearful]. I'm gonna cry. Well, they also say I love you [laughs] and they're, you know, we have other conversations in private, but they were just saying they were writing an article about nonbinary people's experiences and that surgical transition is not the only narrative and they were like, you know, I have to interview you because [sniffles] you didn't have medical transition that included surgery and I said sure, like of course, I'm probably a good data for that, and they were like, well that and also you're like a scholar of these issues so you can speak to it that way and I was like oh yeah, like, I can also provide a quote about what it means that we have this narrative and like these other people, so it's weird a little bit to have your work [sniffles], and I didn't really discuss my work, but like to have your work spill into who you are and then also have to teach the same material to people who are like kind of resistant to learning about trans issues [sniffles] in the first place. These are good tears about thinking, when you think of your friends and you cry, that's that's a really positive experience.

O'Brien: Tell me about linking your, ah, gender and sexual identity to your—

Kolysh: To my work?


Kolysh: To-to the work?

O'Brien: No, to your immigrant experience.
Kolysh: Oh, my immigrant experience. So then suddenly last year I found a group called Anti-Trump Soviet Immigrants [sniffles] and it blew up from like fifty members to like now I think over four thousand, I'm not sure, and I had this great love affair with it and of course because it included, you know, cis men with whom I haven't interacted in so long that this was shocking, you know, because I really fashioned a life of just kind of queer and trans folk [sniffles] around me [sniffles] uh, there were many divisions within that group because they didn't want to talk queer issues or trans issues or women's issues or poor people's issues I'm not sure what they wanted to talk about so there were a lot of these offshoot groups and there was like the anti-misogyny group and the LGBTQ group and um, you know, the parents' group and I just saw this kind of splintering again take place which of course always happens when you're trying to organize a bunch of people because we can't find ourselves anywhere, we can't find all of the aspects of our identities anywhere so I found a group of people that could validate for me the experiences of trauma as a person of immigrant background and refugee background and why my mother is the way that she is and why she's done the things that she has, so that was incredibly healing but then, because I wasn't able to incorporate in a sense a lot of my kind of identity, I still felt sort of fragmented and I, then I got to know some Russian LGBTQ-focused organizations like RUSA, LBGTUSA, LGBT and what their programing looks like and, um, you know, I think that they do work and I don't want to have much to do with it, I just found myself not satisfied with the direction any sort of Russian immigrant group takes in their queer politics and I think that was very clear to me what they wanted to have folks who are at risk for deportation undocumented people come and speak with the NYPD in order to discuss our relations and I just was asked if I would be in attendance you know to speak to NYPD or to translate for the people who only speak Russian and I thought to myself you expect me to sit with a, with a marginalized person in front of NYPD and talk at a table as if there are, there's a level playing field or an exchange that can take place that's like offensive to me and my politics and that was the last time I sort of, um, wanted to engage in that group but when they put on the Pride parade on Brighton this year is the second year and I didn't go last year 'cause it rained and I was apprehensive but I did blame the rain um this rain if it doesn't rain and all the kids can go I am going to the Pride parade on Brighton Beach because I think that my showing up with the kids that I have and my black lesbian lover uh, will make those people so pissed off at our existence and I'll be able to curse them out in Russian and I think there's something valuable in placing yourself in spaces that want you gone and want you dead [laughs] and want you exterminated and to say actually I speak your language and know your culture and I also speak the language and the culture of this country and all the nuances that come with, with living multiple-multiple spaces, right, so it's still a work in progress linking my immigrant identity, you know it's easier to see it when I think about other people you know it's easier to see the the relationship between one's citizenship status and the violence they experience or the precarity of their life or just what's happening structurally but it's nothing, it's not as easy for me to reflect on it in my own life which I think is weird 'cause I reflected on so many other components of my identity I just kind of always think oh I have nothing to say [laughs] about the immigrant journey and then but when I really think about it I have a lot to say and it connects me to so many other people and you know whenever refugee crises come into consideration again I remember that I too ran in that fashion you know like on lifeboats trying to get from one place to another and because we had money we could and other people got
killed and that and that actually helped me think about complex PTSD which is uh, which is something that people, people have as a results of childhood experiences like like this kind of trauma and whatever trauma my mother sort of threw my way, um, so in linking my gender and sexuality and immigrant identity I was able to start, ah, start because I’m not through with it yet thinking about how I exhibit symptoms of CPTSD and so to seek support and help around that issue, um, is new. I’m not new to mental health sort of options or accessing care or thinking about, you know, my mental illnesses, but I am new to thinking that actually what happens to children when they get randomly taken from places and moved and not processed and like all these other things probably stays with you forever and affects like your wellbeing so it’s time to probably think about that too, so I bought a couple books, you know my usual [laughs] very academic take on things, that talk about CPTSD and of course I found myself in a bunch of symptoms but, again, I'm not entirely reliant on the mental health infrastructure in figuring out who I am, so I'd much rather now, now after I'm no longer part of those facebook groups, ‘cause it really exhausted me and burned me out and the romance was fast and quick and we broke up [laughs] you know amongst ourselves. I kept a few close friends that are actually in this kind of therapy group with me, of our own kind, so whenever things come up that are about my immigrant stuff or my mom, I can go to these three people and rant in a way that I can't to my wife or to my best friend, um, he's an immigrant as well, but just a, you know, it's a different culture and a different experience so not the same way, although I think we share so many, you know, uh, issues, ‘cause he's also a queer person so we've always tried to avoid our respective parents and we followed each other from, like I told you, from college to first grad school, we entered this grad school together, we have been, this is my longest and most important relationship is with another person who also found out they're gay, and an immigrant, and it's really we've been friends for sixteen-seventeen years, but only now starting to have conversations about how that connects for us. We just sort of assumed we're are suffering as immigrants and pre-med students and our parents are like this because we're suffering as immigrants and pre-med students, but we didn't reflect on it structurally as sociologists until very, very recently, we just always thought we are on this very assimilationist right, like, upward mobility kind of path, and life did not work out that way at all and I'm glad it didn’t and I don’t have any regrets about dropping out of med school or, like, not going in the first place or where our lives took us, you know, and as precarious as the job market is, and as unlikely it is that we'll have academic posts I wouldn't trade the last sort of seven years in terms of knowledge production and what I gained out of being a graduate student for anything. Wouldn't trade it for anything.

O'Brien: What is your research on?

Kolysh: My research on, I'm an urbanist as they say, an urban sociologist and I take a look at the streets of New York City and what takes place in public places between strangers and that kind of vague and its sort of broad and its like that on purpose, but I guess some of the interactions that I zero in on are cat-calling and LGBTQ directed aggression, and that spans a number of things from nonverbal to verbal to physical assault, and so now in my sort of dissertation and writing my book I am putting forth an argument, that is not new, that these are instances of everyday violence that accumulate to much greater than anybody really considers in terms of impact, that they are lifelong consequences to being harassed across
different spheres and that we do take, we do need to take a look at the public sphere and what takes place there, but then also, in my work I connected just like you did in this interview to the life course, but to how people feel about experiencing violence at home, in the workplace, in their educational environments and the public sphere simultaneously and so I, one of the more trendier aspects of my work is that I interview men that harass me, um, not recently, but I think that when I had the energy for it at the beginning of my graduate career I was able to do that work, I'm no longer able to do that work, and so I shifted gears to focus on the people that are recipients of this kind of harassment and after interviewing sixty-seven of them I burnt out on the trauma that came pouring out into the room that of course, you know, spills into my own, but I still wouldn't trade that for anything, to hear sixty-seven people, most of whom are queer and trans, talk about their entire lives from start to finish and trust me with info, you know how it feels, I wouldn't trade that for anything, so I started as a pure-ethnographer and a sociologist and now I'm sort of saying that I built an oral history of folks' lives that is valuable and I can't give it to your archive or to the Lesbian History Archives or anything, because I promised no one would see, except for me, or transcribe, except for me, you know, but again I privately sit, I think, with a lot of peoples' stories that I always remember, I have an interesting memory, I can photographically remember my transcriptions and I can remember their stories and, um, I'm going to cry again but it's happy tears, it's good to [starts to become tearful and pauses]...walk with others, it's good to.....stand on the shoulders of other people....it's.....at some point I had an epiphany that I'm [tearful]....[sniffles]....rooted in a history....like we all enter it at different points, but together we make something....that's like, that can't be erased......and my story impacts theirs, you know, and they impact mine .....and teaching that to students is really tremendous too and so [sniffs], so in a sense my work isn't as important academically, it's important to just pay witness to how people come to live [laughs], you know, as queer people....[tearful] so I think your work is really important....I don't, you know [sniffs], I just think its tremendous to write our stories down [sniffs], because, um, the dominant narrative is of erasure and of extermination, and I think it's very radical to, um, [sniffs] to remember and I wanted, I remember talking to Jay so much who changed so much in my life, this very prominent activist who put together the first dike march here in New York and, you know, transcribing his story probably took a good month, uh, I have like seventy-seven pages like I said [O'Brien - oh wow] of single spaced transcription of his story of the City of New York and LGBTQ politics here from when he showed up here and was perceived as a lesbian woman for, for many years until he was finally able to transition [sniffs] to get, you know, to get that entire life course written down and to learn from - from - from that and to have someone remind us that the tensions we have when our communities have always been present, that nothing is new, that stuff around biphobia and transphobia and the way lesbians have treated folks and gay men have treated folks isn't new and not an invention of Tumblr and is not an invention of the internet and just that being at risk and being targeted is an ongoing process and I just always think of his - his - his story and I think of Correta King [laughs] in tandem who always said that, I'm paraphrasing Coretta King here, so, who always said that every generation needs to fight, sort of the same fight, every generation needs to wake up and and fight the fight for equality and against injustice in their time, and I just think, you know, he died so soon, too soon [laughs], and was so tireless in his work, in his activism, until his very last day that, you know, that I always want, that we always talked about how when he passes, sort of his experiences and his consciousness would seep into the universe, but it would continue on
through me and through so many other people that he's touched, right, and one day when I
grow up I swear I'll publish his memoir, you know, his whole life that I asked him about, but I
just I'm keeping it to myself kind of for now, um, I mean I'll include a couple of quotes here and
there in my work, but I think it deserves its own, um, its own book, um [sniffles], but yeah, my
work became intensely personal at some point and just kind of joined with my development,
my gender and sexual development, and you know my understanding of anti-racism and my
Marxism, just, um, it's hard to do that kind of work, I think to be a marginalized person and to
do work on marginalized people and to teach on marginalized topics, it becomes really
exhausting, um, but again I think there's much to celebrate [sniffles].

O'Brien: Thank you, Simone.

Kolysh: Thank you.

O'Brien: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Kolysh: Wow, no, I think that's a terrible question to ask me, but I do wanna add that, um,
because of how queer kinship is, that I can be many young people's mom when they get
abandoned by their own parents, in every sense of that word, so email me or, you know,
whichever way you want to get in touch, um, while there are not a lot of material resources I
can offer....I probably will never judge you for a single thing you do [sniffles] or a way you want
to live, you know, and I think that can....probably keep a lot more of us alive....[tearful] so

O'Brien: Yeah.

Kolysh: [tearful] I swear I don't usually cry this much [sniffles] but I think that's an important
message to younger, younger folks who are just like teens or coming into college or something,
to just know that people are out there who can just be like, hey, first of all it's awesome to be
gay, like, not that I identify as a lesbian more thoroughly, like, I think it's amazing [laughs
heartily], I highly recommend it. I think it's awesome to be trans, and I think it's awesome to be
nonbinary, I think it's amazing to know that you can fashion your life based on the truths that
you feel inside, I think it's not grim only to be targeted, and whatever, I think we're sexier, I
think we're fabulous, like I think being queer is a blessing. I'm so happy that my children may
be queer or trans [sniffles], so happy to have children who...can recognize me and I can
recognize them. I think it's amazing to teach your kids to be queer, you know, Eve Sedgwick
once wrote how to raise your kids to be gay and everyone thought it was a very radical piece,
you know, and that you can't simply teach how to be gay or how to be trans 'cause it's not, it's
something you're born with, but I disagree, I think it's not true, I think you can definitely spread
the gay and trans agenda [laughs] just by providing more options and sort of validations,
support and so [sniffles], so to the young folks I think it's awesome to be the way that you are
right now [laughs] and I think that you'll come to learn that too, hopefully, and look back and
say you knew so much more about the world as a result of being who you are. So that's my last
words [sniffles].

O'Brien: It's beautiful.
Kolysh: Okay, thank you.