

*Out/Closeted in the Quadrangles:
A History of LGBTQ Life at the University of Chicago*

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #31

SÁNCHEZ LEOS, JONATHAN (1983-) AB '06, AM '11

At U of C: 2002-2006, 2010-2011

Interviewed: May 10th, 2013

Interviewer: Amanda Bennett

Transcript by: Molly Liu

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Interview (May 10th, 2013):

[00:00:00]

AB: So, usually we just start by asking how you ended up at the University of Chicago.

JL: Okay. How did I end up here? I'm from Chicago. So I wanted to stay near home, stay close. I did that—when I got accepted, they did that thing where you come here and you try out a class or whatever.

AB: Right. Prospie weekend or—?

JL: Yeah. I didn't stay though, because I didn't want to. Even though I'm from Chicago, I'd never been to Hyde Park before, so this was a very new experience for me. But I took an Uzbek class. And I actually had been to Uzbekistan when I lived in Russia, in high school.

AB: Oh, cool!

JL: So I was totally excited that there was this school in Chicago that had an Uzbek class.

AB: Yeah!

JL: And I think—at that time I was living in the suburbs, and I just wanted to get out of the suburbs, and I wanted to get somewhere else. And I also had a boyfriend at the time, he was in Chicago. So I didn't go to Boston, I wanted to stay here. I wanted to be with him. A lot of my worst decisions have been because of boyfriends I've had. But this ended up being a good decision. So that's basically how I ended up here. There were a number of different reasons why. Of course it's

the U of C and I had a scholarship. I was—what was I? The President's Award or something like that? So I didn't have to pay. Which is good. [AB: Yeah!] That's a really good incentive when you're trying to go to school. [AB: Definitely! Cool!] I had no idea what I wanted to major in though, I just came here. I think that's what I liked about the program, because I felt—I was the first person in my family to go to college, so I had no idea what the hell I wanted to do. And this seemed like a good place to not know what the hell you wanted to do with your life for a couple of years!

AB: So how did you end up deciding on Slavic Languages and Lit?

JL: I took a class—my first thought was that I was going to be Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

AB: Oh, that's what I'm majoring in!

JL: Yeah. So I was going to do that. I ended up taking an Arabic class. I'm from the Northwest Side of Chicago, where there's a large Assyrian population. My best friend at the time and my big high school crush was Assyrian. So we hung out all the time. I remember the first day of class, they were talking about all of the languages spoken in the Middle East. I raise my hand and go, “Oh, don't forget Assyrian!” My professor goes, “Oh, no one speaks that language anymore. That language—ughh.” I'm like, “Lady. I just spent the past four years of my life pining after a boy who speaks Assyrian at home. I know the basic words that I need to know.” So I was like, “This is stupid, I'm not going to do this anymore,” and then I was going to be a sociology major, and I have no idea why I wanted to be a sociology major. But I spoke Russian. Because I went to high school in Russia.

AB: Did your family live there or did you—?

JL: No, I did AFS, American Foreign Service, an exchange program. So I went there for that program. I ended up taking a Russian class, and because I'm Mexican and I spoke Russian, I was like the last unicorn because everyone was like, “You should really think about being in our program.” I was the only person of color in the program. I think it's changed a lot since I was here. But I was the only person who was not of Russian descent or white who was in the program. So it was great for me because it allowed me to, you know, explore something I already knew and that made me feel a little more grounded here.

I did poli sci too, only because I was a Mellon Fellow, and my Mellon Fellow counsel or advisor came up to me and was like, “You know, you're going to graduate in a year. And you already knew how to speak Russian before you came here. What are you going to leave U of C with? What did you learn?” And I was like, “Shit! I don't know if I learned anything!” You know what I mean? I didn't have like a marketable skill, or anything like that. I noticed that a lot of the classes

I was taking were in poli sci, so I was just like, “Okay, let me just take the classes I need to take so I can do a dual concentration.” And yeah, that was it. I didn't want to do—a lot of my friends, by the time they were older, ended up in the economics program, because that's where you could leave U of C and get a job as an investment banker and make like \$80,000 dollars a year right out. And I thought about that too for a little bit! But yeah, I just—that whole entire life never really appealed to me. Yeah.

AB: Yeah, I understand. It's tempting! But...

JL: It really is. And you know, I was friends with all the international kids here, and all of them were doing economics. And they all cheated off of each other—I mean, you know how it is at U of C. There's something that the admin likes to say about what the U of C is like, but when you're really here you know that there are ways around the system, you know. So I had friends who, you know, god knows how they got into the school, but they had a lot of money, and they never did their homework and were just copying off people—“Jonathan! You should totally do this! You should copy off the same people, it's so easy!” I have no idea how they have jobs now, but they do. Now they seem to be okay, so.

AB: Did you go straight to SSA after you graduated?

JL: No, I took three years off. This is another saga of my life. I never dated anyone here at U of C. I refused to date a U of Cer. One of the reasons why is I dated someone in high school who ended up coming to the U of C, and we did not end well, and he told everyone here that I was an asshole, and so I was not a very—what's the word I want to say here? I was not a very welcomed person on campus in the LGBTQ community. And plus I was from Chicago, so all my friends were here, and I was able to have a social life outside of U of C.

So I met this guy who was in the Navy, so we went to The Circuit, and they have a Latino night. This used to be really popular. I went there, we met, we had this whirlwind romance, he was living in Hawaii at the time, I decided that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him, I had no idea what the hell I wanted to do profession-wise. So he was like, “You should join the military and because an intelligence officer because you speak Russian.” And I was like, “That makes sense, because I really have no other direction.” So my third year, even though I was a Mellon fellow, and in the Mellon fellowship they try to prepare you to be a PhD candidate or whatever, I was like, “F this! I'm going to join the military!” So I went through the whole process, I took the air force officer qualifying test, and I did like the stupid physical things that you have to do, I just sat naked in a room with a bunch of 18-year-olds—it was a very surreal experience. And in the midst of all of that, me and him broke up. He used to send me movies all the time, and he sent me this DVD of a movie called...what the fuck was it called? Latter Days. Have you seen that?

AB: Oh, yeah, I've seen that.

JL: So the premise of the movie is that this guy who's a Mormon moves to LA, where he's in this building with this really flamey guy, and then they—he ends up finding out his, discovering his sexuality, or whatever. So he sends me this movie. And I'm watching with my friend, who is Puerto Rican Mexican, he's a drag queen, his name is Juan. And we were sitting down, we were getting high, we were drinking. And I said, “I can't even think—why does he want me to watch this movie?” So I called him up and I'm like, “Why did you send me this movie?” And he said, “Because it reminds me of us, you know, I'm like the Mormon guy and you're like the guy who—” The dude's like, in like a fucking speedo for 75% of the movie, that's who I remind you of? I was like, “I don't get where you're coming from with that.” I was drunk and high, so I was like, fuck this, I don't want to deal with this anymore, da da da, so we broke up.

Then I was like, shit, I don't know what I want to do. And so I was already in this process of becoming an Air Force officer. You know, my dad was in the military. And my uncles were in the military. I come from a military family, so I know how to play that part. So when I would go in and talk to all the people, they were like, “oh you're going to make a great officer” and I would do it like that. It's like this call and response thing.

AB: Yeah, my dad was in the military.

JL: Yeah, there's a certain type of language, there's a certain type of way of being that they like. And I knew what that was, so I was just able to play that part. But I kept on thinking to myself, “Do I want to keep on playing this part for four years?” This was before the end of don't ask don't tell, this was when a lot of people were getting kicked out of the military, and I'm like, my happy ass is kind of a slut. I know that I can't keep it in my pants for four years, and I'm going to fuck this up. So I didn't email him back after they sent me the thing saying, “Congratulations! You have a commission!” And then I didn't know what to do.

So I ended up applying for Project 55. I think they call it the University of Chicago Public Interest Project now, UCPIP. It's like a non-profit fellowship and you work somewhere for a year. So I got a job as a gym teacher at a local school. And so I did that, and I did community organizing.

AB: In Chicago?

JL: In Chicago, on the Southwest Side. For a Latino neighborhood. I loved it. It was fun, I got to wear sweatpants all the time. I mean, it was a—after being in an environment like the U of C where everything is so hyper-academic, it was nice having a job that was like, I am a gym teacher. You know what I'm saying? I do jumping jacks with kids. You know what I'm saying? That was—I needed a break. So I did that for a couple of years. Then I wanted to do something more, because

all of that U of C ambition was kicking inside of me again, so I decided that I was going to apply to grad school. At that time didn't know what I was going to do. My sister was diagnosed with a non-cancerous brain tumor. She lives here in Chicago as well. My original idea was that I was going to leave Chicago and go somewhere else, but when that happened, I was like, "No, I'm going to stay in Chicago and take care of her." So we lived together too. One of the reasons why I wanted to stay. So I applied to programs here, and I didn't like any of them except for U of C, and time was of the essence because I wanted to go in the next year, and SSA took my application, and they accepted me and gave me a scholarship. So I was like—there we go. Let's do this.

AB: What made you decide to do social service?

[0:10:51]

JL: Again I had no idea what the fuck I wanted to do. I just wanted to do something that helped people, you know? And I mean, I think the dirty secret that people don't tell you is that it really doesn't matter, you know what I'm saying? At the end of the day, when you leave school, and you're out in the real world, whatever you think you know, whatever you think you can apply in the real world, has no fucking, you know, real application whatsoever. You end up doing everything on the job anyways. And if you're a smart person and able to learn on the job, that's what matters most. If people can recognize that, then you'll be able to do something. But I have friends of mine who are the smartest fucking people that I know, you know, and they're still working as research assistants, because it's like, they don't know how to be able to sell themselves, you know? In the real world, that's what you have to do. Yeah.

AB: So now you're a...

JL: Presidential management fellow, whatever that means. I work with the US Department of Health and Human Services, and I work out initiatives that they have. Right now ACA, the Affordable Care Act, is really what I work on. Just trying to have conversations with stakeholders about enrollment, stuff like that.

AB: Awesome. Cool. So that's the University of Chicago. Did you live in the dorms while you were here?

JL: Yes. I lived in BJ. And my boyfriend lived there with me.

AB: Your first year?

JL: Yes, my first year.

AB: Were you roommates?

JL: No. [AB: 'Cause I was going to say...] He didn't go to U of C. My first boyfriend—so I made friends with all the front desk ladies, the first week I was there. Because—you know, U of C kids, I think there's a reason why people see U of C kids as being very socially awkward. You know? It's because they don't know how to interact with people who are not like them. And they don't know how to have conversations with people that are not on that intellectual level sometimes. So it's almost like everyone here is on that autistic spectrum, you know what I'm saying? And so when I came in, I—I was from the Northwest Side of Chicago, so I didn't—I knew how to have that academic speak, but at the same time I was from Chicago, I was from a neighborhood. So I was able to talk to all the people who worked here, and all the front desk ladies, and whatever. I became really close with them. They met my boyfriend, my boyfriend was the same way, so they just let him live here with me, and no one said anything. My RA was Puerto Rican, so she was totally cool with it too. We basically created a little apartment in my dorm because it was, I was in a single. We stayed together for about a year, and then we broke up, and that was horrible. Then he moved out and I stayed in BJ for one more year.

My third year I moved to Boystown. [AB: Wow, really! Cool!] Yeah, I had a friend of mine who was in the med school here. He's Sicilian and Haitian. We used to go to the same—and back then, black and Latino clubs were the big thing. It was all Blatino, you know? So we used to go to the same clubs together. He was like, “Oh, you go to U of C too, let's get an apartment on the North Side, it'll be great or whatever.” He ended up taking a year off school because there was just so much partying going on, you know? Living in Boystown then—this was pre-Grindr, pre- all that stuff.

AB: What year was it?

JL: 2005. People were online, but it wasn't—you didn't have the same kind of accessibility, you know what I'm saying? So Boystown was still the epicenter of gay life. If you wanted to—if you walked up to someone on the street—and this was also pre-gentrification too. So you didn't have a lot of straight people moving in, it was very much just a gay neighborhood. So we partied. Our little apartment became the big Latino black gay spot on the strip. We would have amazing fucking parties. He was sleeping with this guy who was a bartender. I was working for a catering company, so we would just bring food and drink and whatever. We bought those ten-gallon things of—those igloos? The drink containers? And we'd make jungle juice—I don't know if you know what jungle juice is. We'd just take a bottle of Everclear and mix it with, like, a bunch of different forms of Kool-Aid, and just put it out there. Every weekend we had a party. So my grades suffered. A lot. Because I was commuting between Lakeview and here. But I was doing Slavic Languages, and I already spoke Russian—it wasn't that bad. So that was my third year.

My fourth year, I bought a condo.

AB: Wow, that's impressive!

JL: Yes and no? I mean, it was during the height of the housing market. And so there was a condo that was on sale on the Southwest Side, and I used my Mellon quarterly stipend as my proof of income, and told them that it was my monthly income, and they believed me. So they gave me a loan. So I got an \$80,000 condo when I got the loan. Which was insane! Those kinds of things only happened in 2006. Those things don't happen now, but back then, when they were giving loans to anybody, I was able to walk in with a Mellon fellowship check stub and they were like, "oh yeah totally \$4000 a month, there you go!" It was like, no! That's what they gave out for a quarter! It was not what I was getting per month. But yeah. Thankfully I was able to get a job right afterward, I was able to maintain it. My sister and I still have it. And I lived in DC for a year, then I went to Dallas, and I just moved back to Chicago about a month ago. So we've kept our condo, which is nice, because it's like ground zero.

AB: Cool. Why did you end up going down to the Southwest Side?

JL: Because I hated—I left the North Side because I hated it so much. After a while, it's...

AB: It doesn't seem like a sustainable...

JL: It's not sustainable, it's not really Chicago, you know? And me and my roommate, even though it was great in the beginning, it started getting really bad in the end. He would bring these guys home and for some reason he had this obsession with fucking in the living room, and like the main entry to the apartment went into the living room, so he locked me out all the time. You know? And so I would be like pounding on the door screaming, I'd be like, "Come already! I'm trying the fuck to get inside!" It was like, it was a bad—it started getting really bad. So I ended up moving in with the guy that I was dating. He lived on the Northwest Side on Irving Park and Sacramento. I was living in his attic apartment part-time because I couldn't stand my roommate anymore.

AB: That's really far from UChicago. I'm dating a guy who lives out there, so I know it's far.

JL: Yeah. Commuting every day sucked. But I had a car. A mini Cooper, so I was just able to zip around the city, and it wasn't a big deal for me then. I had a lot of energy back then. I just was like—for some reason, I didn't care. I was a very, very angry brown gay person. I think that I was still very much—one of the reasons why I had such an issue with U of C gay culture and also North Side gay culture is because it's very much Anglo-centric. It's very much a white version of what it means to be gay. Right? And people kind of take for granted this understanding that, oh, gay just means gay. Well, no. There are racial and cultural

aspects to what we understand as being gay in the United States. And there's a reason why when you look at gay people on TV, they're all middle-aged upper-class white guys. You know? I was trying to just be like, a rebel, fuck all this shit, and I don't have student loans.

So my—I was talking to a friend of mine, who's actually a lesbian. She sent me pictures that I'm going to send to you. [AB: Awesome!] We were talking—it's funny. She was an international student, and I became kind of adopted by the international crew here. One of the reasons is because I'm Mexican but I'm light-skinned. So everyone assumed that I was an international student. I also had lived in Russia for a while, and whatever. I had all this disposable income because of the Mellon fellowship, and I didn't have to work. So everyone just kind of thought, “oh, he's like one of us.” And so I had very little responsibilities when I was here. The majority of the time that I was here, I basically just went to class and fucked around and drove all around the city and stuff like that.

So getting the condo was my attempt at—I don't know, just not being a U of Cer. I just wanted to be something so far away from what U of C represented to me at that time. Because it represented to me this—this unaware privilege. All the people that are talking about privilege, and talking about what it means to be oppressed but not really understanding—or wanting to really tap your feet in it, you know. We're all talking about it, and it felt like we were all a bunch of poverty pimps. We're talking about other people's pain, but we're not really experiencing it, but we want to pretend like we are because that makes us feel better. So I moved to a little Polish neighborhood, and I was really happy. Because it was—it felt—to me at the time it felt real. You know? When I first moved to the Chicagoland area with my grandparents I lived in Joliet, Illinois. I lived in the Slovenian/Mexican neighborhood. And all my family there are blue-collar workers, so I've always been different in my family. But getting a condo on the Southwest Side in a Polish neighborhood where there's a lot of Mexicans there too, doing all the work, doing all the floors myself, working with my uncles, it felt like I was reconnecting a little bit, from the four years that I was playing rich. Talking to all these international kids that were just doing a shitload of coke. Didn't have a care in the world because as soon as they graduated they were just going to be going back to their own country and being able to work for their parents, you know? That's a really long answer. I'm sorry.

[0:21:17]

AB: No, it was great! This is really great.

JL: And I liked the international set, because people didn't care. There was—there wasn't necessarily a question of sexuality, and again I was not embraced by the gay community here at all. Mostly because I was on that fence of being very angry about being Mexican and being on campus and being very angry about being gay and not being accepted by MeChA [Ed.: *El Movimiento Estudiantil*

Chican@ de Aztlan, social justice Chican@ and Latin@ student organization] either. I got into an argument with the president of MeChA, who was like, “You're not a good representation of a Latino because you're gay.” [AB: Whoa.] Yeah. That type of shit, that was the tail end of it. After 2006, I feel like the culture changed a lot, but still in 2006, 2002-2006, being gay was still very much taboo, you know, on campus. It was something that people wanted U of C—U of C had just put sexual orientation down in their nondiscrimination policy, this was still something that was very new, and it took a while for people to catch up.

AB: So you didn't get involved with gay student stuff at all?

JL: I mean, I slept with some of them! Back then, you know, the big thing was gay.com. That was the big website that everyone used. gay.com and Manhunt. You knew that if you went onto gay.com, and gay.com had this neighborhood search function, where you could look at Chicago and look at a neighborhood. And if you clicked on Hyde Park, you knew that everyone in Hyde Park was U of C-related. And so I met some people, and I went to a couple of things. But yeah, I felt like part of me too at that time was—I don't know. I just felt very different from everyone else. I came out when I was 15. So I wasn't really wrestling with my sexuality the same way that other people were. There were people on campus that I knew were gay—not knew, but I mean, like, I assumed they were gay. They would tell people they were straight, and I would scream at them, “faggot! I know you're a fucking faggot—” I was—I was a very different person. I said things—and I should preface this too by saying that I was a punk when I was in high school, so I was very into that brash, in your face kind of stuff. And there's a couple that I'm still friends with that came out after they left college, they were like, “You used to scream at me faggot all the time on campus, and that was kind of rough.” I was like, “I'm really sorry, you know, that was just where I was at that time.”

I was just having a conversation with someone. I aggressively self-label, because I pass. If I walk on the street or I'm at work, people don't think first of all that I'm a minority, or they think that I'm Arab or something like that, or they think that I'm straight. For me, I don't want to be one of those people that is able to be empowered by my ability to pass. Because I think there are a lot of people that are like that, and you see it a lot. You see a lot of gay guys who pride themselves on being straight-acting. This ability to be cisgender, this ability to be kind of just, you know—this ability to live in both worlds secretly, it's an empowering thing. And I don't want to experience that. I want to be able to be—this is who I am, you know? Everyone I meet knows within the first two or three sentences that I'm gay, and I'm Mexican. Because I want them to—with all the bad that comes along with that, I want them to put it on me. And also because I want people to be able to reject it as well. I think that for me that's my social justice. I think it does a lot more than me kind of just signing change.org petitions, you know?

And I think at U of C, there were so many people who were still grappling with

that shit. Because so many people go through that exploratory experience when they're here, and I was an anomaly because I came out when I was 15, I was already part of the gay community then. A lot of the shit people were talking about, a lot of the conversations, I felt like I was above it or something. I went into Queers and Associates, that was—does it still exist?

AB: It does. Yeah.

JL: I went to a couple of meetings with them, and they were talking about, like, gender-neutral pronouns and stuff like that. I was like, that's great and everything, but—and I remember for me, they came off as being crass because I was like, “you guys are talking about this, when really we should be talking about the fact that people are getting gay-bashed in neighborhoods. We're not talking about economics, we're not talking about class, we're talking about a very specific problem that is still egocentric. You're talking about yourself.” And for some reason that just rubbed me the wrong way then. I did some things with them, I went to a couple of the parties. They used to have underwear parties a lot.

AB: I think those still happen in BJ. Yeah.

JL: Oh, really? That's...kind of sad.

AB: I don't know if it happens anywhere else.

JL: It's funny, we went to—there was an underwear party, and this was off-campus. Kind of at 54th and...what's that street? Ellis. 54th and Ellis, and there's this guy who's now an assistant professor at a University of California school who will remain nameless. He was hosting this party, he lived with a bunch of other gay guys. I went there and I brought a bunch of my friends who were from my neighborhood, so they were from the Northwest Side. And they were all black and Puerto Rican. We were there, we were dancing in our underwear and shit. My friends thought that U of Cers were really funny. They thought that they were just, like—because U of Cers are kind of dorky. And they don't really know how to interact with people, and two of my friends were drag queens, so they were just really catty and witty—they were always the life of the party wherever we went, you know? We were there, and I remember there was a girl who was there. She was from the neighborhood, and some of her friends had come in and they had gone to the room where everyone's clothes were, and they stole everyone's phone, and everyone's wallet. And so I remember, someone found out, and then me and my friends, we knew that we didn't want to leave our shit in the room, we're from the city. So we were like, “we're not leaving our shit anywhere!” So we had it on us.

We went outside and then she's crying because they basically all looked at her because she was the only person who wasn't U of C and wasn't white. You know? And so, she was crying and she was like, “I'm a local, I'm sorry, da da da.” It hit

me because—we forget about race in our conversation about sexuality, right? But it's still very much a salient fact. And I remember some of my friends that were there, I probably brought four of them. They said, “you know, if she hadn't said that, they probably would have thought that we did it.” That pissed me off. Even though they didn't actually accuse us of anything, the thought that this is what people assume. There is a hidden racism that exists at U of C. And I think that was the last underwear party that we ever went to, the last U of C gay event we ever went to, because I was just so turned off by that, that whole entire experience. They automatically turned to her. And yes, she knew the guys. And she was trying to cooperate as much as possible, but it seemed like they were all so upset at her, because it's like, “you brought in this element.” Right? This unsafe element that now has victimized us, in this very egocentric way. So yeah.

AB: Okay. Did 5710—was that open at the end of when you were here?

JL: That was at the end. And I never reached out to them at all because it was run by—like all this shit has its own politics, right? And I didn't like the people that were running it. For me their conversations were very, were too me-centric. I wanted to have conversations that were more about systems. Like really kind of coming to grips with how we deal with race, and how—and I feel like 5710 was an attempt by the university to do that? It definitely was—

AB: Yeah, because OMSA's in the same building.

JL: Yeah. But it was still almost like a—you're still separate. It's still a separate building, you have to go to a separate place, and I didn't like this idea of creating—and this is also the reason why I didn't stay in Boystown. I didn't like this idea of, we're going to create a mecca for ourselves. We're going to create this new gay ghetto where we feel safe. Right? And we're going to ignore the rest of the world outside because that's scary and that could be dangerous, whatever. We're just going to sit here and pat ourselves on the back that we've created this great space that the university has paid for. But, you know, besides the fact that you're ordering food from the Nile every day doesn't mean that you're doing any good for people, you know what I'm saying? Yeah. So that's where I was at that point.

[0:30:26]

AB: Yeah. And your involvement with gay stuff outside the university was mostly social?

JL: Mostly social. I'm trying to think if I did anything. I worked at Beatnik's, which is in Boystown. Roscoe and Halsted. For my first year that I was here. I was the wig boy, so I went there when I was—I had just turned 18, my senior year, and I went down to Roscoe's, and I showed up in these short fucking shorts and a wifebeater. And I was like, “hey do you want to hire me,” and they were like, “sure, yeah,

whatever!” So I got paid under the table, I got paid like 12 bucks an hour, which is like a shitload of money!

AB: Even now, it's a lot of money!

JL: At my job, where I worked, there was a wig room in the back, so I would work there. I'd wear a harness and I would just like talk to people. All the drag queens would come in late because it was open until 2 o'clock in the morning and ask for eyelashes or a wig or whatever, and I'd get it for them. I tried doing both my first year, because I worked all summer there, and maybe half of my first year, but it ended up being too much, it was too much to go up there and then come back. But I remember during the O-week, when I was here—I showed up for O-week late. The whole entire week, and I showed up on Friday or something. They were like, “Where the fuck have you been, you were supposed to be here,” and I was like, “...” I mean, I didn't—I think I just saw—I didn't see a lot of value in that kind of stuff. So I showed up. I showed up with my boyfriend and we moved all of my shit in.

I remember I went to go smoke—I was a big smoker back then. And back then BJ was a smoking dorm. So I went to the little, the fire escape, and I met my best friend, her name was [redacted], she's Turkish, she's in the pictures I'm going to send. Who's lesbian now. We were talking—she was like, “Oh, you live here now?” I said, “yeah.” She said, “Oh, you live on my floor?” I was like, “yeah.” And I forgot how I got to it, but I was like, “Oh yeah, this is my boyfriend,” and she was like, “Oh, you like boys? I like boys too!” And so we became friends. And then her cousin also went here, and I remember I went, I was like, “Oh, I can't stay long, I have to go up to the North Side to work, but come visit me, if you want to!” She showed up in a cab with her cousin, and this guy, and they showed up at Beatnik's. I'm in the back, I'm like dealing wigs and whatever, and I was like, “Oh, girl, I'm getting off in like an hour, you guys should come with me, I'm going to go to this club.” There was a club that was on the Northwest Side on like Milwaukee and Western. Over by Margie's Candies? It was called The Scene. It was an LGBT Latino club.

AB: Does it exist anymore?

JL: No. There were—

AB: I've been trying to find a gay salsa scene for so long.

JL: No, it exists! There's a lot of them, actually. But the thing is that to know that community—that community is very different. It's all through text messages. You don't see their ads in the gay weeklies or things like that. It's all more underground, you know. But The Scene was there and we went up there. I remember The Scene, it was this crappy fucking place, it was up above a taqueria so it smelled like meat when you were up there. And there was a wall just full of

mirrors. I remember, I was like, “oh girl, let's all go together,” so we caught a cab and we all went to The Scene together. It was me, my boyfriend, my sister showed up too, and a couple of other friends that were in the neighborhood. There was a shooting outside. Like, they got really scared. I was like, “girl don't even worry, that shit happened like two blocks away you know whatever.” She reminded me of this too because I went out to Turkey to see them. She reminded me of it, she was like, “dude, you told me,” I remember like, some friend was like, “they need to get out of here,” and I was like, “no, they're from Istanbul! They know what this shit is” or something like that. Whatever! I had a completely different idea of, like, where they were from. I didn't know that they were from a very wealthy family, you know. And so they laughed, they were like, “I think we need to leave,” so they went into a cab and left.

I think that story is a nice little representation of what my life in U of C was. I think I just had a very hard time—and I didn't want to, I didn't want to give up either world, I wanted to be able to live in both. It was hard because U of C is kind of its own island. And if you want to be really U of C, you have to just be U of C. There's not a lot of room to be U of C and something else, and I really wanted to be both. It worked in some ways, because I can have conversations with people, which is great, but at the same time, I didn't get the full U of C experience. When I graduated from here, I didn't really feel like I was part of it. I wrote a bunch of papers and shit like that, but I didn't network when I was here, I never did an internship when I was here at all. I graduated and people were like, “what the fuck are you going to do for work” and I was like, “fuck if I know!” I had no idea what the hell to do. Because I had lived in this weird bubble, kind of. But it all works out in the end, you know what I'm saying?

AB: Did you stay connected to your family too, when you were here?

JL: My family is—I come from a very dysfunctional family. My dad, my dad's actually Sicilian. My mom's Mexican. But I did not grow up with my dad, my dad has his own problems, he's not really part of my life. But my mom, she got remarried and she has two kids. They live in the suburbs. The reason why I ended up moving to the suburbs for my last year—so I went to Russia when I was 15. I stayed there until I was 16, like half of 16.

AB: Did you come out there?

JL: I came out before. I came out—I was living in Joliet, and—this is a ridiculous story. I was 15 and I was living in Joliet with my grandparents. We lived on the West Side of Joliet. My grandmother had just gotten out of the hospital for some surgical procedure, and we were a large Mexican family living in this little house, and no one had a room. I never grew up with a room. I slept on a couch a lot. We used to have a stack of mattresses, and my grandmother would just pull them off, and you'd sleep on that—I never grew up with that confidence of having a room, you know? I remember when my grandmother wasn't there, there was a room that

I was sleeping in, and I had this collection of drawings of naked men. Right? That I had drawn. I was also really obsessed with tracing my dick, you know? So like, I used to get hard and plop it on a piece of paper and I'd draw around it. I don't know why, I just had this obsession with it. So like—there were all these pictures of my dick on there, and there was—the house that my mom lived in, she lived in Joliet for a little bit. We lived in a house and there was an alleyway behind it. I used to go in that alleyway a lot. We had a dog, and I'd walk him down and up it. There was one day I found gay—back in the day we had VHS tapes for porn. It came in this like really big fucking box. Fucking huge. And I found the cover for the gay porn in the alleyway. It was run over and on the side. So I kept it. I had that, and I had all these dumb pictures, and I had them all folded up, and I had them underneath my—there was like a dresser, and I had them underneath and to the side. No one knew about it. They were hidden under there.

Well, my grandmother when she came home, she was going to have to move into that room. So my uncle was in there, and he started rearranging furniture. So I came back from high school, and I saw him in the room, and I saw that he was moving the thing. Aw, fuck! I was going to try to go in there to get it, but then I saw that he saw it. And he picked it up. And then I was like, I'm not going to stick around for this. I ran into the garage, and I grabbed my bike, and I just started riding. I didn't even fucking have shoes on. I was just like I need to get the fuck outta here. I didn't have shoes on, and I'm driving my bike, and I'm riding to the house that my mom used to have but was getting foreclosed on, whatever, and I was hoping that she's there, and whatever. But she wasn't. So I broke into the garage, and I was just hiding there. I was crying and whatever, and then my grandfather and my aunt, I heard them. There wasn't another place to really fucking go to, you know? So they drove up to the driveway, and I could hear them, and then they started knocking on the door, and they were like—my name is Jonathan. You can call me “Jonathan” [anglicized], but like—“Jonathan, get out.”

I got out, they didn't talk to me at all, and I got in the backseat, and then they drove to their house, and I didn't want to go inside. So I went into the garage. My uncle had four boys that all lived in the house with us. This is a small fucking house. This is three bedrooms, but there was a lot of people living in this house. My uncle comes out, and—I raised those boys, you know? And they were crying, and they were like, “We want to see Jonathan...” and he was like, you know, “Ustedes no hablen con Jonathan, Jonathan está enfermo,” like I was sick, and I was just like, shit. And I lay down and just cried and cried and cried. I don't even remember how the fuck that night ended. I was just, I was just—I didn't know what the fuck to do, I was like, my uncle is saying that I'm sick in the head, and my cousins are crying and I was like, I don't even know what to do. My grandmother though is a very cool person, and my grandmother never cared that I'm gay. I was always my grandmother's favorite, because I'm the lightest-skinned in the family, because that's how Mexican families work. I came out very light-skinned, so my grandmother was like, “Hay miiijo, tu eres muy güerito,” whatever,

whatever. She was the one that protected me from my family, and was like, “You know what? No one says anything about Jonathan. You don't even talk to him, you don't even look at him, nothing. He lives in this house, and he can stay here for however long he wants to.”

But I knew I had to leave, because that was like—this isn't working out. And so I remember I was going to Joliet West High School at the time. I went to my high school counselor and I was like, “I need to get the fuck out. I can't live here anymore.” I didn't know what the fuck my uncle would do, my uncle was a cop in Joliet, and he was scary as fuck, and I was like, “I don't want to live here.” They told me about AFS. So I applied to the program, and I went to Russia, and that was basically it. When I came back, my mom had gotten pregnant by some guy that she worked with, her boss. He had a lot of money. So they bought a house in the suburbs, and I remember that they picked me up from the airport, I had just come back from Russia, and they got into the driveway and she was kinda like. “You are MY son.” Because I wanted to live with my grandparents—“I had never lived with you, I don't want to live with you, I don't want to live with your boyfriend, da da da”—and she was like, “No! Tu eres mi hijo, whatever, you need to live here with me.” I was like, [claps hand]. I lived with her part-time. I lived with her part-time during the week, I went to high school there, and I would just go back to Joliet on the weekends. I hated that type of suburb life, you know? And yeah. I don't remember exactly why I was telling you all that shit, but I came out when I was 15. It was a bad experience. It was not the best experience in the entire world.

I came fully out—because even when I went to Russia I didn't fully accept the fact that I was gay. I still kind of thought, well, maybe I'm bisexual or something, but I remember, we had our—we had a camp before for AFS. All the kids were going away somewhere for AFS, we were at Long Island State University or some shit, right? I don't even remember! It was like, I remember I drove there with my mom and my grandmother. We drove from Chicago to New York, because we couldn't afford the plane ride for me to be able to go from Chicago to New York. I had gotten a scholarship to do this shit, and my mom was like, almost insane back then. My mom—she was 16 years old when she had me. At that point she was like 31 or something. She was still young. So we were like, fuck it—I missed, again, orientation week. I missed all of it. I was just there for the last two days. But I went up there for the last two, they were like, “We've been looking for you!” I was like, “We've been driving from Chicago here.”

I was there, and I had—I was 15 but I looked older because I had the Mexican goatee, you know? And I still—back then, living on the West Side of Joliet, I mean—I looked very Mexican. I used to wear the stupid white shirt with, like, the plaid over it. And the fucking khakis and whatever. You know, I knew that I looked older than what I was, and I went into the campus bookstore and I saw that they had a porn section, and there was straight porn, and behind it there was this thing that was like, “Adam's Gay Video Guide,” or something, but it was a thick

fucking magazine! So I pulled it. Looking through it, it was like six bucks or something, and I thought, this is my chance. This is a college campus, I already look like I'm over 18, and I had spending money. Because my grandmother pulled out \$800 for me, like "Here, mijo! This is for you when you live in Russia." And thank god I lived in Russia! Because it was so cheap to live there. I actually felt like I had a shitload of money there even though I didn't. But yeah, so I had money, and I was on a fucking college campus, so I bought it. I hid that shit away like you have no fucking clue. But I was so happy that I had it, you know? My host family eventually found it, and that caused a whole entire other issue, because I was in Russia and there were—

AB: What city were you in?

JL: I was in Cheboksary. Which no one knows about. I was 6 hours away from Nizhny Novgorod, which is the third-largest city. Yeah. It's kind of a funny city, it's about 700,000 people that live there. Yeah, it's still very much—it's not Moscow. It hasn't caught up to modern times. When they opened up a McDonald's there a couple of years ago it was the biggest thing in the world. My friends—I still have a couple of friends there—they sent me Facebook messages, like, "Look!" And pictures of them at McDonald's, it was a big deal.

I lived up there, I lived with this one host family, and there was this girl. I think she went through my shit, because I had this shit like,—the most locked-down you could have when you're 15 years old. I had it folded up, and I had like three plastic bags over it, and like rubber bands around it, and it was in my duffel bag that in my bigger suitcase that was zipped up and under my bed. You know? It was—unless you were really fucking snooping through my shit, you wouldn't be able to crack this thing. But I lived in Russia, so my host sister went through my shit. I found out because I remember, I looked through my magazine, late at night, when there was no one there, da da da, and I saw that there was a page missing. I was like, shit. Someone found out about it. I remember, I came home, and my host sisters were both crying, and they said, "You can't live here anymore." My host parents didn't want to talk to me. I remember my host mother screaming something about how he can't live here, and why is he here in Russia, he should go back to the United States, this is no place for him, and they wouldn't tell me why. But I knew. I knew what it was, but they wouldn't tell me why. So they sent me back to Nizhny Novgorod to go stay with the center director or whatever there, because the center director was evaluating me or something, to see if I could still stay in Russia. No one ever said that I was gay. No one ever asked me if I was gay.

AB: Was the center director Russian?

JL: She was Russian. Everyone was Russian. She was like—I remember she told me this weird thing. I still remember to this very day. We were eating together at her house, and she was like, "Nye chafkai." It means like, "Don't chew with your

mouth open. Your host family might not like it.” It was the weirdest thing! And I was like, “Okay. I won't do that anymore.” If that's what it was. But no one explicitly said, that's why your host family doesn't want you to live with them anymore. No one ever said that, you know? Which was weird. Because everyone knew it, but no one wanted to say it. I didn't really know that that's what they meant until, oh my god, it's so stupid.

In Russia, people thought I was from Chechnya. They thought I was Chechen. Because they'd never seen an American that wasn't blond-haired and blue-eyed, you know. So when I'd be on the street, people would call me horrible names. Horrible names. There's no such thing as political correctness in Russia, you know. If I was walking with a Russian girl, they'd be like, “ti chernnozhopa,” which means like “black-assed.” Because they call everyone from the south, they call them black-assed. And I got used to being called it. Part of it was that I also went to a white school when I was here in the States, and I was called “gifted” when I was a kid, so I had to leave the Catholic school where I was at and I went to the better Catholic school that was all-white, where people called me “wetback” and they called me “spic” and everything else. So I was kind of used to being called derogatory names, it didn't really affect me.

So people calling me shit, I was like, whatever. I've been through this shit before, you know? I remember I was in school one day, it was at the end, when I was getting ready to go back to the US. And the way you say “gay” in Russian is “goluboy.” “Goluboy” means “light blue” in Russian. If you see someone and you're like, “oh, on goluboy,” that means he's gay but he's light blue—that's how you say it. I remember there was this guy, saying—he was like the popular kid in the school, and he was talking to this kid, and he was like the funny one, so he was like, “oh, on cherny maza, on goluboy maza,” which means “he's not black-faced, he's light-blue-faced.” Which in Russian was hilarious! Because it was like a play on words, so on. I remember I was like, “[gasp], they all know. Everyone in my fucking school knows.” I was like, “fuck this, fuck this shit, da da da.”

[0:49:55]

I also went through a huge transition when I was in Russia too, because I went from being this very quiet Mexican kid that never talked at all to—I dyed my hair, I got a tattoo, I had piercings, I started getting into rock music. A lot of it was because of the other foreign exchange students that were there. I had one really good friend, her name was Christina, she was from Cologne, Germany. She was just this person that was like—she played the guitar, she had red hair, da da da. Just a very cool German teenager. Like the coolest German teenager you can possibly ever meet, that was her. I remember, I was on a bus with her, and for some reason she asked me my story. I grew up in a family that was like—you never tell anyone anything about you. You—you don't say anything. Because if you tell someone about you, they can do something to you. You know? I don't know why, but I really liked her and I wanted to be her friend and everything, and

I just blurted out my whole entire fucking life story, you know? And I remember she told me, “Jonathan, you're so cool, but you need to look cool on the outside too.” And I was like, “Okay! Yeah!”

I remember in Russia at the time there was this famous singer, his name was Tarkan. He was a little famous here too for a bit, Turkish, he had that kiss-kiss song, like [smooch smooch], da dada daa—I can't even, I'm tone-deaf, whatever. Anyways, he had this really famous song in the US too for a little bit. Anyway, everyone in Russia was like, “You look just like Tarkan!” This Turkish singer, right? Basically I looked like a terrorist, but: Tarkan. They had no other way of pegging to in something. But I remember she was like, “Yeah, we need to make you look cool! What do you want to do?” And I remember I wanted to dye my hair. I wanted to dye my hair blond, because back in the late '90s that's what all the cool kids had, right? So we dyed my hair blond, but because I have black hair, it didn't turn blond, it turned bright orange. You know? I remember, I was like, “It's supposed to be fucking blond!” And she's German, she's never worked with hair with this much fucking melanin in it, and she was like, “Oh, but it looks really cool! It's like orange, and different” and I was like, “Cool! I have fucking orange hair! Done!” And I thought I was the coolest person in the entire world.

It was finally this ability to be someone that I always wanted to be, but I never thought I could be. Because I grew up in a very Mexican, blue-collar neighborhood, where everyone dressed the same. Even though I went to white schools, I hated it because I remember my first day I went to the rich white school, my mom didn't have money for a uniform for me. The uniform was that you were supposed to wear navy blue slacks and a light blue shirt, something like that. She went to the second-hand store and bought me this faded-out light blue shirt that was long-sleeved, but it was a t-shirt. I was a chubby boy. So I wore this shirt, and it was tight. And it was like, the last week of August, it was hot as fuck outside, and I was just sweating. I remember, I sat in this fucking room, and all these little white kids are around me, and I have this stupid, whatever, I look like I'm a fucking vato that's trying to look good for his probation date, whatever. I know that I look horrible. They ask me to talk, and I say—I had a little bit of an accent back then, so they said, “Oh, you sound like Speedy Gonzales” or something like that, and I was like, “fuck.” I didn't want to talk, I was just really quiet, and I ended up retreating back into this—being this weird Mexican kind of thing. It felt safe.

But going to Russia and meeting this girl, who was like, “no, just do whatever the fuck you wanna do,” it was like an eye-opening experience for me. I was like, yeah! I remember, I always wanted to wear a long-sleeved t-shirt underneath a short-sleeved t-shirt, because that was like totally subversive, and no one in my neighborhood would ever fucking do that. Because if you did, they would be like, “who the fuck do you think you are?” But I did it, and I remember the first time I did it, I felt like I was the shit. I was like, oh my god I feel so cool. You know? After that I was able to find my own voice, after all that bullshit. I came back

from Russia, like a new person, and I was really into rock and punk and whatever. Yeah, it was just—my understanding of myself as being different was much more, how do I want to put it? Digestible. Not digestible—I was proud of being different. It became this thing that was like a badge of honor. Like, I know that I'm different from everyone else, and I'm cool with it now.

So going to high school in the suburbs sucked, because no one even knew the fuck I was. I remember I came back in 2001, I came back from Russia in June, I went straight back to Mexico to stay with my family, I came back here like the first week of September, and then September 11 happened. And everyone knew that I had moved from a different country, but they didn't know—America's international consciousness is still very much in development, you know? So back then they thought that I was Muslim, because I moved—it was the weirdest thing, because back then I had this bright red hair, and like, earrings all up and down my ears, I don't know why they would think I was Muslim at that time. But they did. I was different, you know? So they'd say this, say that. But compared to how I used to react before, which is that I would swallow and whatever, I would fight back. Not like, I wasn't brawling in the fucking hallways, but I'd scream shit back at them. I became this very angry kid that people were like, “oh, don't fuck with Jonathan because he's gonna do this or he's gonna do that or he's gonna freak out on you.” And that became power too. That became a sense of owning your shit.

So when I came to the U of C, it was the same thing. That's why I was screaming at kids that were totally fucking closeted that they were faggots, you know, and I thought—it was just a persona that I felt comfortable being. And it wasn't until much later that I realized that I didn't have to be angry. Being angry didn't have to be part of my personality. That was actually a really bad byproduct of my childhood and everything else. Yeah. I hope that answered—

AB: No, this is just me trying to collect people's stories. U of C is part of that story, but it's going to be influenced by everything else.

JL: No, totally. Everything is, right? And that's the cool part of U of C, is that you come here and you have all of these stories behind you, and you meet other people that have cool stories too, and it's just a weird—you can find some really cool people here, you really can. They're kind of hard to find, but once you do, you can really connect with people on a different level than outside of the U of C. And I found some people here I totally love and that I still talk to to this day. Because it's like, we were able to connect on a level that you really can't. I don't really talk to a lot of people from my neighborhood anymore. I mean, I kind of do, but we just can't relate in the same way. But I have friends here, like my best friends, that's just—yeah. They ain't going anywhere, because we get it. You understand what it's like to live in these different worlds, and to come out of it a stronger person.

AB: Awesome.

JL: Yeah. Is that all the questions?

AB: I'm trying to think. 'Cause it's definitely—there's a series of questions that your life doesn't fit into.

JL: I'm sorry! Okay!

AB: No, no, it's awesome, you—for most people I've talked to, this is just in case there are some people who will answer with one sentence, that's really what these scripts are for.

JL: Oh, but I did want to tell you about the photos that I'm going to send you.

AB: Yeah, definitely!

JL: Yeah, so me and my friend, we were—

AB: And if she wants to talk to us, give us her information.

JL: She's in Istanbul.

AB: We've done some phone interviews!

JL: She might actually want to do it. She—

AB: Because I did a Skype interview with a guy in Columbia.

JL: She said she wanted to do this, actually. Let me see if I can find it. I downloaded one of them...We used to dress up in each others' clothes. So I'd dress up in a dress and she'd dress up in, like, I had these stupid fucking army outfits or whatever, and she'd dress up in those. And we'd go down to BJ and have dinners down there, and they were our dates. And then we had these backstories, like she was a Turkish general, and I was her Russian whore, and like, whatever. For us—we were idiots. I asked her for them because she had them, and her subject line was like, “We were dumbasses,” because we really were. We thought we were being so fucking subversive, because I was wearing her dress, she was wearing this or whatever. It was our version of Genderfuck.

AB: Was Genderfuck happening then?

JL: Genderfuck happened a couple of times. I went to one Genderfuck. I mean, I...part of it was that I was never attracted to many people at the U of C. I'm just going to put that out there. I mean, that sounds horrible, but I wasn't. I didn't—

AB: I mean, I understand.

JL: Yeah, there was a—there was a type of gay person that was here, you know? And I don't—it was a very, they probably were at GSA at their schools, and for them being gay was so important, was so central to them, and I just didn't feel that, and it was hard for me to relate to them. I thought they were really whiny...The guy that I dated before I came here, he ended up coming here too. We both went to like an alternative prom or an alternative dance in the suburbs, because at that time I had sex with some guy that was older. I got sent to principal's office because I had told this girl—it was my AP macroeconomics class, and we were talking about welfare. And I was like totally left-wing and all that. She said something about how—she said something really fucking racist, and classist, but she was a popular girl, and she was like a cheerleader. At this fucking school that I went to, all of the cheerleaders wore their outfits on Fridays, and it was horrible. I was the only, I was the only minority that was in all of my AP classes. There were no other minorities. At that fucking school, when I took the entrance exam, they made me take it twice, with the teacher in the room because they didn't believe what I had gotten. It was a—Fremd High School, you can put that out there! Fucking racist bitches. But I was in class with her, and she was saying something totally ridiculous, about how black and Hispanic people were spending her money, and I told her, I was really pissed, I told her, “Not all of us can suck our daddy's dick for money.” And the whole class was like, hunngh. The teacher was like, “You need to go to the principal's office,” and I was like, “fuck this!” I was so angry back then that this was a common response. The cafeteria lady told me that I shouldn't be speaking Spanish in line, that I was in America, and I flipped out on her too.

I went to the principal's office, and I remember I used to wear these stupid—like, those punk things? With the little spikes? And I had another one—when I was 17, I went to Germany to visit my friend Christina. You know, whatever. We had done weekend trip to Amsterdam, and I had bought bondage cuffs. And I thought they were the coolest thing the entire world. My friend who lived in Cheboksary, Russia, she was Brazilian. She used to wear all these bracelets as memories. Recuerdos, souvenirs. She used to wear them all up and down, I thought it was so cool, so I copied the same idea. Everywhere I went to, I used to wear another bracelet. I used to have them all up the way up to here. They were all these crazy things, and people knew about me, so whenever they would give me a go-away present they would always give me a bracelet.

[1:03:05 – 1:03:42: trying to find an email]

Anyway, I went to the principal's office, and then he was like, “You can't be using that, it's a weapon,” and I said, “No it's not, it's actually used in gay sex,” or something stupid like that, so they sent me to the school psychologist. Who was gay. Like flaming homo. And he was asking me about me being gay, I remember he said something about my mom, and I was like, “you don't know me!” Anyway, he said something about my mom, and whether or not I was having sex, and I was

having sex with this older guy, which was totally horrible, it was. I had met him online, and he would pick me up and we would have sex, whatever. He was like, “You shouldn't be doing that anymore, you should find other people your age.” So he gave me information for this teenage high school alternative prom thing that was in the middle of nowhere. So I went out there, and I didn't really like it. I met this guy, and he ended up blowing me in his car, in the parking lot. At the end of the year.

So that summer we hooked up all the time and he'd come over to my house, whatever. He lived in Oswego, Illinois. And I lived in Palatine, Illinois. So he would drive all the way from Oswego to Palatine to see me. I never really liked him. He called me up at my home phone, because I didn't have a cell phone, and he left a stupid message about, like, that he was buying underwear and he hoped that I liked it, and my mom heard it. “Who the fuck is this?” And I was like, oh my god. I called him up and I bitched him out, like “What the fuck do you think you're doing? Are you really that fucking dumb?” So anyways, we still ended up hooking up a couple of times. He came over to my house a couple of times, and we had sex, and he was like, “oh, how have you been” and I was like, “oh, I'm okay, I was dating this other guy and I don't really know how it's going.” He was like, “Wait. You're dating other people?” I said, “Yeah. We're not dating.” And he started bawling and crying. “I thought we were dating, da da da,” no. We're not dating. You just come over to my house every once in a while. I remember he was crying, and this was an asshole move because I was like, “You have to leave because my mom's coming home soon.” I know. It was a dick move. But he knew I was coming to the U of C, and he was here during O week, and he told everyone “There's this guy named Jonathan and he's this and that and whatever.” That was it. It was bad. I can see from your face that—

AB: No, that's—I mean, it sucks to get here and have everyone already hate you. That sucks!

JL: I mean, it wasn't—people still sought me out.

AB: But I mean, most everyone comes to college and is like, “Oh, I get to start over!”

JL: I know, but I wasn't even interested in starting over at that point. I was already in the gay community. I didn't really care about people going “ohh” and embracing me in the warm embrace of gayness, you know? But yeah. I think it did kind of suck only because—it did a little bit hinder—

[finds the email with pictures] Oh, here it is. She titled it “Retards,” that's why I couldn't find it. All right. So that's us. That's her dress, and she's wearing this stupid fucking outfit that I bought from the secondhand store. There are a lot more.

AB: Where is that?

JL: That's in BJ.

AB: All right. I've never been in BJ, so.

JL: We actually did these little chalk drawings in the back too. We were bored, we never... There's another. She used to grab my tits all the time. We thought it was funny.

I mean, like, don't cry for me Argentina, we had friends here. I just didn't have friends with the Queers and Associates group. Which at the end of the day I didn't mind so much. It gave me a different experience of being gay here. You know? And that was good and it was bad. I think that when I was here with all of my international kids, I think I did change their ideas of what it meant to be gay. You know? They would always be like, "Jonathan, you're not really gay," and I've heard that my entire fucking life. Even my family, they would be like, "You're not really gay. You pretend, and this is a phase, whatever." I think in Mexico too, it's important to note that you can have homosexual relationships in Mexico and not be gay. So long as you're not trying to date a man, you don't have to consider yourself gay. My family's from Monterrey, Mexico. I don't know if you know Mexico.

AB: I have some friends who are from Mexico.

JL: It's in the north. So I grew up there every single summer for my entire fucking life. We lived near a store called La Soriana. La Soriana is Mexican version of Wal-Mart, basically. The big store, you know? They're—everyone in Mexico knows that if you want to hook up with a guy, you go to the bathrooms at La Soriana. Everyone knows that. There's that—I'm going to teach you about Mexico. So there's Soriana, Sanborns. If you're gay and wanna hook up with someone, you go to the bathrooms at Sanborns or La Soriana. There's another place called VIPS, which is like this casual Mexican dining chain.

AB: I think they have that in Spain too!

JL: Really? VIP?

AB: I think I remember it! It was like a store and a restaurant.

JL: Yeah yeah yeah! Same concept! Same concept. They had a stupid store where they had really overpriced shit that no one buys, and there's like the fucking tela azul... the restaurant. The restrooms of those places are known to be gay hookup places. And these guys have their families waiting for them outside, you know? In Mexico it's completely acceptable to do that kind of shit. It's not necessarily—you don't broadcast that shit, you know? But there's this idea that your sexual behavior is very much separate from your sexual identity. So I kind of bucked a lot of that

shit by coming out. In my family, there are a couple of people in my family that I know do gay shit. I know that they do gay shit. But they're not out. So for me to just be like, "Yes, I'm gay!" For them wasn't just about my sexual orientation, but me rejecting my place, almost. It's like, "No, you're cisgender, which means that you're supposed to put on a happy face for the family." You know what I'm saying? So, yeah.

[1:11:05]

[going through the photo] So I used to wear her sundress and cowboy boots. And we would go down to the dining hall. I'll send you the photos. I asked her if it was okay for it to be part of your collection. And she said yeah, so I think it'll be a nice little addition. It was our way of bucking gender stereotypes as well, but in a different way. And I feel like that was my issue with Genderfuck too. Genderfuck was like, "let's be gender-dissonant, but with each other." You're fucking preaching to the choir, you know? Who the fuck cares? If you end up going and you see a bunch of other guys in dresses, are you going to pat yourself on the back because you know, you just told each other the same argument that you're all in agreement to begin with? You know? It doesn't do anything. So we would do shit like this because it felt much more revolutionary. See, that was me in college. I was a cute little twink! But I'll send you the pictures so you got them. But yeah, that's it.

AB: Awesome. Cool.

JL: Any other questions?

AB: I'm trying to think. Yeah, because we're interested in people's stories and we're also interested in the history of just—at the beginning of this week, I interviewed Jeff Howard, who's the director of office of LGBTQ student life, so we're trying to see...It's interesting to see how the institutional stuff and the institutional view, and then the view of students who were here. At SSA, was there a queer scene there at all?

JL: At SSA, when I was...it was weird because—so SSA has us all in cohorts. And my cohort probably had all of the black, brown, and gay kids in it. Trying to remember. So I was very good friends—one of my good friends did this interview too. She's also from the college and also graduated from SSA, so we had lunch the other day. She was like, oh my god! It was the greatest thing in the entire world, you can talk about college, no one wants to talk about college. She—we saw each other, and they just stuck all the queer and minority kids together in the same goddamn cohort, because we looked at the other cohorts and they're all lily fucking white. Across the board. It was like, yeah, so this was on purpose. I think I—the gay scene at SSA was different because it was still this conversation about queerness, and I'm still not cool with the term queer, because as soon as you create a community that's based off of some type of criteria—okay.

My issue with queer is that it's not a very accessible community. There's a language that you need to adopt in order to queer, there's a behavior that you need to have. It's a very...it's a very select community, and as soon as you create a community you create the basis of exclusion. Right? So we're queer, but we're also creating the definition of what it means to be queer. And I have issues with that, because it doesn't feel like this warm embrace of "oh, let's all be together!" It's like, "No, in order to be one of us, you need to use gender-neutral pronouns, you need to be totally cool with trans shit and da da da, and anything that's not that, we can't accept that. We need to buck all that shit." And I've had issues with it because there are racial connotations to that too. If you're a Mexican guy, or a Mexican gal, whatever, and you grew up with a certain understanding of what it means to be a man or what it means to be a woman, why are we holding it against you that you have these understandings? We should be embracing of you, and realizing that this is a learning curve. It's not like we all come to the fucking U of C. And we're all completely versed in Foucault and completely understand sexual power dynamics—that's not the rest of the world. So us just being—these circular conversations, I'm very much against. And I feel like at SSA it was very much that.

Because the social justice world? Outside of tumblr, it doesn't really have a lot of impact. It just doesn't! It tries to, but it doesn't because it's not all-encompassing. It's still selecting a certain population, and it's having a circular conversation about justice with them. It doesn't want to compromise its message to be able to embrace a larger population. You know? And for me, I feel like—I can't get in bed with that. For me it's about a larger picture. I want to be able to not just have these basically like academic masturbation conversations, which is like, "Oh, isn't it so great that we all read the same books?" No, I don't think that changes anything. I think our ability to change shit is having conversations with all those people that we are secretly discriminating against. "Oh those ignorant bastards, they don't know anything"—no, we need to engage those people in a conversation. Because if we're not engaging them in a conversation, we're never going to create any type of change, you know?

Beyond that the SSA gay scene...what can I say about it? I don't fit well in the gay community in general. I'm in a triad. So when I'm in a triad, that looks really weird to a lot of gay people, you know. There's been this weird, and I'm sure you've seen this, the gay community in general has tried to validate itself through heteronormativity. Look at the shit we fight for. We fight for marriage, and we fight for being able to be in the military, and we fight for all this shit that's like—that's heteronormative bullshit. I mean, I get it. If we—if me and my partner can get married, and be able to pay less taxes, totally! Give me some more of that! But you know, I'm not fighting for it because I believe I need to live up to that standard to be accepted by the larger dominant culture. I'm a happy being with two men. And I think we have a very loving relationship in the way that we are, but I hate the fact that in the gay community, there's this idea that we need to copy

what straight people do in order to be accepted. We need to adopt the kid from China, and we need to do this, and we need to do that, and that's going to make us acceptable. I fucking hate Modern Family. Okay? Have you seen Modern Family?

AB: I haven't. But I know the content—I know what it's about.

JL: There's a gay couple, they're both older white guys. They never touch each other on the fucking show. So it's like, it's this cleaned-off—

AB: So they're just like straight men except they're gay?

JL: Totally. Because that's the message that everyone sends out! It's cool that you're gay, just don't do that gay shit in front of me. No, I want to do that gay shit in front of you, because that's who I am, you know? And if you have a problem with it, sucks to be you, you know? I walk with my two boyfriends, who are—one of them is a Marine and the other one's in the Navy, and we're Mexican, we're all hairy and big—no one says shit to us. I feel like that does more, because we're changing people's opinion in our own way. I don't want to get married to change someone's opinion of what it means to be gay. It's like, “Oh, look, they can have a monogamous long-term relationship, just like we can! It makes them just like us!” No, I don't believe in any of that. I'm not just going to do it because it makes other people happy. Especially when you go to a prestigious institution like the U of C, there's a certain amount of buy-in that you need to have, an establishment to what gay means. And if you are not necessarily in that definition, then you're kind of rejected as a result. Me coming with my two partners to a social function wasn't really accepted. It was looked at as weird.

There's not a gay organization at SSA, and I hung out with all the lesbians. We used to have parties and shit like that. But it wasn't an organized kind of—we're all gay, let's hang out together. There was an attempt, which confused me. There was a girl there who was gender-neutral, who had not transitioned, but wanted to be called by male pronouns. I was totally cool with it, I was cool with it, but she was still biologically a woman, and I was like, “Are you planning on transitioning?” She was like, “No, I'm not, but I still want you to use masculine pronouns.” Then I found out that she had a boyfriend, and I was like, “Do you consider yourself gay?” And she said, “No, I'm not gay either. I just am.” “Well, if you just are, then why are you so hung up on me calling you a masculine pronoun then?” The whole entire thing was really confusing to me.

I didn't understand—there's a—in the social activist world, I feel like some people just want to be different in order to be different. You know? Because there's a certain cachet that you get for being the left-handed deaf-mute, like, let's see how disadvantaged I am. Because of how disadvantaged I am, that gives me more power, right? And I don't like those conversations, I feel like that's pimping your pain. And not to say that it's not valid. People go through shit. But we all go through shit. And just because I go through some level of shit doesn't mean that I

get the right to deliberate, to be able to judge other people's pain as a result.

[1:21:12]

I remember I was sitting in class, and there was some girl who was saying that she hated it because we were all doing the School of Social Work. Like, oh, she hated it when she talked to these privileged girls who were upset that their parents were getting divorced. “I don't want to talk to them, they don't really have problems,” and I was like, “Who are you to say that they don't have fucking problems?” It's like—I mean, yeah. I was physically abused during my fucking childhood, I'm from a broken family, all this fucking shit, right? But I am no one to judge anyone else's pain. That's not on me to do. I have those same girls. I can understand that their shit is just as fucking devastating and traumatic to them as it was for me being kicked out of my house. Those are the same fucking things to me. It's all about how you're judging your experience. So I do have some issues with queer, that queer kind of idea that we can quantify pain. And if I have a certain level of pain, I have the right to be able to judge other people. Sorry about the rant, but—yeah.

Otherwise at SSA, I got into an argument with a professor on the term “queer.” I walked out of the LGBTQ—there was a class, like, how to serve LGBTQ populations, and I thought it was way too eurocentric and talked only about European and Western understanding of what it meant to be gay. And there is, there's very little known about gay culture, or homosexual culture, because gay has a lot of cultural connotations to it, about how people only want to talk about what's happening in Western Europe or the United States with gay culture. And I feel like you're just, you're totally just whitewashing an entire history of experiences, and valid histories that exist. It's not because it's not there, it's because you're not looking for it. And I do have issues sometimes with the LGBTQ community because we take that for granted. We all want to say, “Oh, you're gay, so you listen to Barbara Streisand.” No, I'm Mexican. So I have no idea who the fuck Barbara Streisand is. I listen to Gloria Trevi. You know, that's our gay icon out there. Why is she any less important to our gay culture than Barbara Streisand is. And as long as we keep on having that circular conversation, then we forget that there's a whole world of experiences out there that are equally fucking valid. Even if it's uncomfortable, even if it's fucking difficult, we need to look at it. I swear a lot. I'm sorry.

AB: It's fine! I don't care!

JL: But yeah. So that's it for me. I'm trying to think if there's anything else I should share about being gay on campus. They probably already told you about Cobb.

AB: No?

JL: The bathroom of Cobb?

AB: So in the '80s, it used to be the bathroom of Wieboldt. But I don't know anything about the bathroom of Cobb.

JL: Bathroom of Cobb, bathroom of the seminary?

AB: The bookstore?

JL: No, the—

AB: Div school?

JL: Yeah, the div school bathroom. And then the Reg stacks, of course, that was always a big one. And also at, not Ratner. [AB: Henry Crown?] Yeah, the Henry Crown shower rooms. There was a lot of undercover gay activity that happened here. [AB: Really?] You know what's weird? I never dated anyone here at the U of C, but I had a lot of sex. And the majority of people I had sex with, they were always like—they were always grad students and they were always closeted. There's a lot of closeted activity here at U of C. I think maybe that's also the reason why I didn't really like the Q&A community, because they ignored this whole entire other gay culture that existed here. But yeah, I slept with a lot of married guys when I was here, a lot of older married dudes who were just trolling the bathrooms on campus. And that's an important part of gay culture at U of C! That totally exists. And yeah, I think that it's even true today, you know what I'm saying? Me and my partners, we were open for a little bit. Yeah, there's still very much a gay sub—I wanted to use subterranean, but no, underground. Underground culture that exists here, so that's important to know. So yeah, bathrooms of Cobb, and there was—

AB: Because I don't think stuff like that happened in girls' bathrooms, so I don't know about it.

JL: Yeah, it is a gay experience. I think part of it is that you do have a lot of people coming here from different countries, with very similar understandings in Mexico about what it means to be gay. Where your sexual behavior has nothing to do with your sexual identity. So over here at Cobb, you would have all these... como se?

AB: Stalls?

JL: Yeah, little stalls over here, and the little urinals over here, where there's a big mirror in front of the urinals. Wherever you find mirrors and urinals, you're going to find gay people. Right? Because it means you can look in the mirror and see everyone's dick. So people would pee and look in the mirror, and then you see someone, and you see them checking out your dick, they see you checking out their dick, and then they stroke a little bit, and you'd go over to the stall area, and they'd follow you.

AB: Interesting.

JL: Cruising. It's a thing here.

AB: Apparently the Wieboldt bathroom had a U shape and you could see who was coming in or something. I don't know. That's why the Wieboldt bathroom used to be the biggest.

JL: Yeah, I feel like there's a lot of purposefully gay construction of bathrooms on campus. I was telling one of my partners about it, and I was like, "You can tell when a bathroom was designed by a gay person and when it wasn't." You know? Like, if there's a fucking divider that goes from here all the way up on a urinal, you know a straight person designed this. But we've been to some bathrooms where the urinal comes all the way out here, so it forces you to stand back and pull out—you know that there's some gay dude that was like, this is perfect, because then you can look up and down, and how everyone's packing up and down the line.

AB: Wow.

JL: So there you go! It was very nice meeting you. And I hope this was good information for you.

AB: Yeah, this was awesome!

[01:27:57]

End of Interview