NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ABIGAIL B. THOMAS

Interviewer: Natalia Ortiz

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Transcribed by Colette Arrand (professional)

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**Natalia Ortiz:** Hello, my name is Natalia Ortiz and I'll be having a conversation with Abigail—

**Abigail B. Thomas:** Thomas.

**Ortiz:** Thomas. 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 April 29, 2017, and this is being recorded at SAGE Midtown Manhattan. Okay. So hi, Abigail.

**Thomas:** Hi Natalie. How are you doing? [Laughter].

**Ortiz:** Good, how are you?

**Thomas:** I’m doing pretty good.

**Ortiz:** Okay, great. So, tell me or tell us your name, tell me your name, and your age if you would like.

**Thomas:** Yeah, no, no. Um, I’m Abigail Thomas, and I am 46—I’ll be 47 this August.

**Ortiz:** Oh wow. Taurus? No.

**Thomas:** [Laughter].

**Ortiz:** Leo! [Laughter]. Leo?

**Thomas:** Leo! Definitely Leo! [Laughter].

**Ortiz:** Okay, what is your gender pronoun?

**Thomas:** My gender pronoun traditionally is she/her, but I can also go by they/them and xie/xem/xir.

**Ortiz:** Okay. And how would you describe your gender?

**Thomas:** Well, my gender is basically developed from a trans girl, transfeminine. But over the years, it’s been informed by my experience to be sort of like a non-binary transfeminine.

**Ortiz:** Okay.

**Thomas:** So I’m still in many ways a trans woman. I go out into the world as one, etc., but I have like this internal non-binary, like, I don’t know what to call it, mechanism? This feel to it? It’s like, I’m always natively rebelling against the idea th just because I’m a trans woman, I have to obey a stereotype or, you know?
Ortiz: Right.

Thomas: But that anyone else does.

Ortiz: Right. [Clears throat]. And can you tell me a little bit more about your daily life in terms of being non-binary, like being you and your gender identity?

Thomas: Yeah, it's really original, because I've had the non-binary um figured out in some ways for the longest time. So now I'm starting to own more of the um transfeminine part, like, obviously, I'm not doing the makeup, [Laughter].

Ortiz: You look great.

Thomas: And I want to, it's not for a lack of want, it's just all those years of not doing it, and just acting like in some way that blended in.

Ortiz: Yeah, I hear you. Okay, so where were you born?

Thomas: I was originally born in Brooklyn, New York, over at Victor Morrow Hospital. Actually only part of it remains, I think the other part was developed for condominiums, [Laughter].

Ortiz: [Laughter]. Okay and—

Thomas: So I'm old enough to know what that feels like now. [Laughter].

Ortiz: Okay, fair enough. So have you lived all your life in New York City area?

Thomas: Actually no, in 1987 I moved with my mother and my sister down to Miami, Florida.

Ortiz: Oh, okay.

Thomas: So, and I spent down there between '87 and 2000. So I missed a lot of the emerging culture up here as far as the changes that happened, but I also benefited from the culture down there, which is, in many ways New York is better, in many ways Miami has some things that are better. There's more of an openness to it, a natural one.

Ortiz: Okay.

Thomas: It's even in the architecture, the buildings, like a lot of them have completely open first floors. You can literally—there's no doors, you can just walk right on there.

Ortiz: Wow. Nice. [Clears throat]. So you've been living in New York City since 2000?

Thomas: 2000. So I came up here just in time for the wonderful events of September 11.
Ortiz: I know.

Thomas: Yeah, right?

Ortiz: Changed everything.

Thomas: I know.

Ortiz: Okay so [clears throat] how was it growing up here in New York?

Thomas: I think in a lot of ways it was good to me. In more ways than I can imagine. Um, it wasn't until I actually got down to Miami that my eyes started to open up to things like um racism and such. The um system here shelters you a lot from these things. Not totally, but enough that you can walk through ignorantly, believing that it doesn't exist in the world.

Ortiz: Right.

Thomas: Because until then I really hadn't seen racial divide. I mean, I had existed in a very diverse environment and I went through special ed most of my youth, which depending on where you go is extremely diverse, not just in like, the races and ethnicities and so forth, but you know, what people are functional in and so on. So then to go from that sort of like, what I would consider, um, utopian environment of people just like being able to get along into someplace like Miami, where even though it seems like a lot of races exist down there, they exist in their own separate spaces. The contrasts are more notable, especially back then. In ’87, it's like Miami Beach, where we had moved to, okay, they have a lot of people who were Spanish and Latin in origin, but at the same time it was mostly whitewashed.

Ortiz: Okay.

Thomas: And even the immigrants, this was the case, and then the other ones who were darker skinned would be in places like Overtown—

Ortiz: Okay.

Thomas: Which was on the mainland, like, in the slums or whatever. And it's like, I even like, a lot of the times I would walk through there, not thinking, because I was always used to such diversity, and it's like, I get off in any community and it's like what, it's a community, it's like people walk through, and I get people staring at me. And I'm like, why?

Ortiz: Right. Okay.

Thomas: It's interesting to say the least.

Ortiz: Okay, do you remember any great stories or legends, either in New York or in Miami that you can recall from your childhood?
**Thomas:** Well, since most of my childhood ended up in New York, um, wow, any great stories or legends from here? I've heard a lot, but I think mostly I've always taken from um people. I've always looked up to actual people. The only fictional character I really looked up to in my youth, and this is going to seem all screwed up, but it was Darth Vader.

**Ortiz:** [Laughter].

**Thomas:** And the reason why is because this was a sad story, this was a very sad person—

**Ortiz:** Uh-huh.

**Thomas:** In a sad state, who is still taking back his power. I agree with you, according to the story it's evil, it's sinister, but he's like, held up by these machines, and by default he's like the cliché disabled person, in a manner of speaking.

**Ortiz:** Right.

**Thomas:** And so him being all powerful and that is sort of taking bck his power and saying I won't be defined by these disabilities. So—and part of me being in special ed, which because I was disabled, so, you know, I sort of connected with that. Um, but more I took, um, real people. Um, Carl Sagan I always liked. Martin Luther King was some person I saw as someone to aspire to. I'm trying tok of the young—it's not Emma Watson. I can never think of her name. she's like this really early feminist/anarchist. Like early 19th century. I can never think of her because she went over to Russia to do the whole Russian Revolution thing, and a lot of people point and say oh, that's a communist, or she was in with what Russia was doing, but she really wasn't. She, like a lot of people that went over, were tricked into thinking they would do something right. And then when she came back, she's like, when she was finally let in the country, she wrote that she was completely disappointed because the people that went over there were betrayed. And the—I can't even remember her last name right now, but they were betrayed into thinking this would be something different for people, for real people, and it ended up being just another government/you know, we're going to make the money thing.

**Ortiz:** Right. Okay. Interesting. So um can you describe your childhood and family background?

**Thomas:** Okay. My childhood is, my early childhood especially as a disabled child was mixed with a lot of things. I mean, of course I too joy in life or whatever, um, but I was sick a lot. And then there were a lot of things I mentioned in school, and there were a lot of social problems that go on there. I mean, in my first eight years basically I was like, tormented, set on fire once, raped—

**Ortiz:** What?

**Thomas:** Yes. So it's sort of like, and then the whole thing—the whole pity of it was that the rape had me convinced—I always conflated that with my gender. Because it's sort of like, it's
easy to do. You have this like, significant sexual assault happen to you at a young age, no less. I was something like seven and a half, eight.

Ortiz: Gosh.

Thomas: I’m telling you. And I—I sort of like compacted that down there. I stuffed it down, and I always just told myself, the gender thing was part of that. It was when it really wasn’t. Because I mean, that was one thing I got from reading Janet Mock because she talks about similar experiences when she was younger at that age, and she actually got either molested or raped by one of her brother’s friends. And I’m like wow, you know? That hits home. And it’s like, suddenly I’m like, real, which is a total spin on the [inaudible], and I totally connected with it. And then she—I think she indicated somewhere in the book that that sort of had her confused for awhile because um she sort of conflated the two together as well. And I’ve heard that about a lot of people lately. I’m like wow, that’s interesting. But yeah, that’s one of the things that held me back for so long, because I had held back on transitioning not because the desire wasn’t there, because I felt it was something in me that was put there by traumatic events rather than what it was.

Ortiz: Mmm, right, I see. Wow. Did you talk to someone, or you kept it just to yourself?

Thomas: You know, I kept it to myself for quite some time, as what basically happened was finally it was—my feelings about this and a lot of issues were coming to a head in 2014. And I’d already basically come to sort of conclusion I was [inaudible] probably on a more subconscious level. And so what happened was finally in 2013-2014, I went into the therapist and I said—over at Beth Israel, what’s now Mt. Sinai. They have an outpatient on [inaudible]. I think it’s between 13th and 14th. No, it’s between 15th and 16th. My head. And I talked to them, and I got on anti-depressants, and it was probably the best thing I did because I’d already been fleshing out some of this before but once I got on the anti-depressant, I started getting motivated to do things. And I started fleshing out all of this, including the rape and all the torment I went through and so on and so forth, and like, holy smokes, this is not because of this, this, you know, may have happened in connection with it, but this is totally separate. I’m like, this is me. This has nothing to do with being traumatized aside from me as a person was.

Ortiz: Right.

Thomas: And like wow. So then I started doing—I went and I started in addition to doing therapy there, I found a clinical psychologist to talk to to try to get deeper, because in outpatient centers, the therapists there have a limited amount of time and concentration. So you really can’t get that deep. So then you start, at that point I start talking, found someone finally and started talking to her. And then I’m like, when I reach that point, I’m like listen, this is what I am, and I’ve just got to deal with it. I’m going to deal with it and do something about it. Or I’m going to crash mentally, and I didn’t know what that meant.

Ortiz: Right.
Thomas: All I knew is that I felt that there was this performance I put on for the world, and I was tired of the performance. So it was either going to be I was going to come out and take a breath or you know, the whole performance would just fail, and I don't know a good analogy for that would be.

Ortiz: Right.

Thomas: I’d trip over my own thoughts and break my figurative ankle. [Laughter]. I mean.

Ortiz: [Laughter]. Okay, wow. Very.

Thomas: Yeah.

Ortiz: Wow, very interesting. I can't imagine, that must have been very confusing.

Thomas: It was, but in the end it's extremely rewarding. I mean, more so than just like, putting on makeup or anything, and I'm not living with those things. Those things are significant in their own right, but I mean, coming out if it that way is like so powerful, it's like yeah, I mean, I'm 44—no, I'm like 46 going on 47. I held on to this for around 40 years or more, and now I'm like, two and a half years, I've gotten SRS, my hormones, I'm transitioning well.

Ortiz: Good for you, and congratulations.

Thomas: Thank you! And it's just like, wow!


Thomas: I think the first person—I think, and I don't want to get too far off the interview, I think one person asked me going into SRS, what would be the first thing I would do once I got it, and I think they were trying to imply like what kind of action would you get into, and I turned around and said, I'll run the New York City Marathon, [Laughter].

Ortiz: [Laughter]. That's funny.

Thomas: Yeah, right?

Ortiz: Okay so, how did you deal with all of this in your childhood? You didn’t tell anyone, but how did you deal with it?

Thomas: Not, you know, I’d like to say it's the best or the worst, but I really can't say either. The way I dealt with it per se was to stow it away, and every once in awhile when I would get the opportunity like for example when I was like I think nine and my sister is like three years younger than me, I snuck into her room, [Laughter], and I tried on her bathing suit and I said oh, this looks great, [Laughter]. But I mean, it's sort of like aside from windows like that, I really didn't get that much opportunities. I think one of the best vacations I had, when I first moved
out to Miami, I was working in this Burger King restaurant, um, like 198th and Collins Avenue. It was mostly Canadian and German tourists who were basically staying in the hotels over there. But the assistant manager was a GNC homosexual. He was a GNC gay man, which you don’t meet quite often. And he was kind of cute. Um, about 10 years older than me, but hey. But no, nothing ever came from it. He was already engaged and in a relationship, but he thought I was cute and he would always chase me around wanting to make me up. And I think it was like a few weeks into it, I said finally I’m like, yeah, why not? What have I got to lose? [Laughter].

Ortiz: Right.

Thomas: And I let him make me up, and it was like the most awesome feeling. I wish I had pictures of it. He could take anyone and like, literally he could make Lou Ferrigno look like Cindy Crawford.

Ortiz: [Laughter].

Thomas: It was like—and he just took and did the simple makeup, and I was like 18 at the time and everyone thought I was gorgeous. And I’m like, wow. So I just used to love coming into work—I mean, I think it was only for like three or four months, but I loved coming into work for that reason.

Ortiz: Right, yeah.

Thomas: It was like—

Ortiz: How did you, like, how did you have that experience and not continue with the transition or --?

Thomas: Because basically at the time, my mother was dating, um, someone—well she would start dating someone up here. See, this is the problem, and it’s also amazing to me sometimes, she dated a man who is very masculine and very toxic masculine, and whatever else. And he used to like, um, well there’s no kind way to put it, he used to hit me.

Ortiz: Okay,

Thomas: So I had to put up with his abuse, but when I was down there, I would try things like I would put on bikini underwear, and he would basically humiliate that concept, and that was men’s bikini underwear.

Ortiz: Oh wow.

Thomas: Yeah, so I had very little spaces, generally speaking, where I could actually experiment or where I felt comfortable with it.
**Ortiz:** And when you became an adult, like when you had the chance to do it because you were independent—

**Thomas:** It's kind of, yeah, it's kind of a weird thing because I was always—it was always, as far as the family unit, we were always enmeshed. Even when she stopped with her boyfriend and it was always me, my mother, my sister. And then yeah, nowadays it's still the same thing, even though a lot has changed. But yeah, so I never really stopped, mostly because in the dynamic that was there, it was always my sister, my younger sister, was always the one that basically got spoiled. And I was basically the one that was leaned on. So I never really felt free to experiment, which was a pity. Because looking back now, I could have experimented a lot.

**Ortiz:** Right.

**Thomas:** And it's kind of interesting. I had a, like you said, the Burger King was definitely an opener.

**Ortiz:** Right.

**Thomas:** And I had a conversation with my father in a car when I was like 14, 15, which was really interesting because he like saw how I was growing my nails and at the time I never really got into tucking, but what I had done for a short time was I would take regular maxi-pads and sort of tuck it down there, [Laughter]. Because it was the easiest thing to do, and he spotted them and then he knew how my nails were growing out, so it's like listen, are you gay? And I'm like, oh wow, no, I'm not gay. And then I went into the story of how the rape happened, because I was still like, connecting the two in my mind, and I was like oh, because of that, I'm girly. Because that was the way I put it.

**Ortiz:** And then the rape was perpetrated by—

**Thomas:** The rape was basically perpetrated by two young men/boys. I mean, they were about 13, 14 each. And one basically um, well one took the front, and basically molested me from there, and the other took the rear door. Whatever it was [inaudible]. And that's a whole other amazing story on its own. Um, but the short end of that is I basically had gone out to go out and play because it was the first clear day in awhile during fall, and on my way out, the person—I forget her name, Mrs. Suburth or something, she basically said I wouldn't go out there, there's bullies in that school yard. I'm like that's a really weird thing to say. But I went out there anyway and um so I was out there, they managed to call me over because at the time I was very much a loner. And then they eventually lead me to a convenient area in the schoolyard and then under a staircase in the corner where no one is watching, you know. Um but the gist of the story was after that I went running back into the lunch room and she was standing there and I went to tell her, and she basically turned around and said, I told you so. And I'm like, wow.

**Ortiz:** Wow.
Thomas: Yeah, right. Exactly. And that set the tone for—because really I was already being incessantly bullied. So you know, I was looking to someone else to give me like a measure by where they stood, and then she said oh I told you so, I figured oh okay so it's no different than someone taking lunch money?

Ortiz: Wow.

Thomas: Yeah, right. Um yeah so that was like, in that stage of how I interpreted gender, and undoing that did a lot of good.

Ortiz: Wow. Okay, and who is the most important person in your life?

Thomas: I think the most important person falls in two categories, or is actually two people. One would be my mother, and the second would be my paternal grandmother. Um my mother was basically a single mother, my father was basically always drugging himself up, so he was not there at all, and she basically raided us working off the books, you know, taking whatever she could from welfare, and with me I was a sick child so I had even the seizure medication, so we were on food stamps and Medicaid, the whole nine yards. And my paternal grandmother, who was like 18 when she came over here from Ireland, and she had basically worked herself through whatever she needed to in life, um, but yeah, she was the one who would like, if my mother was doing off the books work to like bring home money, she was the one who would be there as backup. So if the school couldn't get in contact with my mother, she would get the call and she would come out and pick me up. So I spent a lot of time with her. [Laughter].

Ortiz: Okay, good. So um, who are you close to now? Besides, you know—

Thomas: Um generally speaking, my mother and my sister, [Laughter], which I should get closer to other people, [Laughter].

Ortiz: Okay.

Thomas: I need to diversify, [Laughter].

Ortiz: [Laughter]. And how about work? Like, how is your work environment nowadays?

Thomas: My work environment is definitely involved. Um, I basically, my road here has been pretty long. It's been like, you know, not like I've been panting, it's been like one long breath, and now I'm just releasing, or I had just released, so I went on to disability for depression in about 2009 I think.

Ortiz: Okay.

Thomas: So now I'm still on disability, I'm sort of amazed at where it's gotten me thus far. Um, but yeah, I'm looking to, now I have this surgery, I'm considering before I go leap back into things, what else do I want to have done? Because the hormones are—I'm not going to say
they're the easy part, but relatively speaking they're easier than let's say vocal surgery or breast implants or whatever it is.

Ortiz: Right.

Thomas: So slowly just considering that. But yeah after that I'm looking at long-term plans right now. I've got—they're not the prettiest—I got called in by Section 8, so on the 16th, in the middle of all this madness that's going to be going on, I'm actually going to be in Rochester to see about an application I put out there, and if it pans out, I could be moving up there. I don't know about permanently. I mean, I may be between here and there for awhile, given, you know, the medical care and everything. But.

Ortiz: Okay, okay.

Thomas: Life. It changes. [Laughter].

Ortiz: I know, yeah. Okay. Now what does community mean to you? Are you—you know, you come into SAGE, and—

Thomas: Yeah, no, community I think is something we build together. I think a lot of people get the idea of community as far as nostalgia. It's like, I grew up with this when I was younger, and I think for some people that's fine. But for me, community is more like what I build with other people. It's a connection, it's the love, it's the sincerity. Like when I come where and when I connect with a lot of people it's like all of that is community and it's much more than these walls that are here or even the individual stories.

Ortiz: Right, right. Okay.

Thomas: Because we're building new stories.

Ortiz: Right, [Laughter].

Thomas: [Laughter].

Ortiz: And how does the trans community play a role in your life?

Thomas: A lot, actually. Um, it really—and I'm sure to say this it really hasn't played a huge role in my early life, which I think both of us were robbed of. Um, but yeah, now it does. Now it feels like I'm playing catch up. I'm like, reading a lot of good trans literature, watching a lot of good trans media and trans acting and it's like, I'm totally like, wow, I should have watched this years ago, this is good.

Ortiz: [Laughter]. Good, good for you. And um, how do you see yourself in this moment of increased LBTGQ visibility?
Thomas: Oh, I see myself in heaven. I mean, the only other thing that could happen, and I think it's coming right behind the LGBTQ is the range of disability or disabled people, which I think it's coming right behind them. Um, a good example of that is in this city. For I think it's been the past two years, I think it's going to happen again in June, they actually have a disability pride march. I'm like, really, [Laughter].

Ortiz: [Laughter].

Thomas: And it's like wicked. It's like all these discussions like I hear these young kids on YouTube talking about what it's like to be deaf or hard of hearing and I'm like, yes, I know what that is, [Laughter].

Ortiz: Can you tell us about it a little bit? That disability? Like you were—

Thomas: Yeah, no, I mean um I basically, I don't know which came first. I mean, I've had epilepsy and when you've had it, you have it. It may not be medicated, as mine isn't, but it's still there. It's a matter of life, it affects the way you relate to people and adjusts your moods and so on. Um but I think mostly what's impacted me is the profound hearing loss, because—and this is what I love about this transition. It's like, I have got my first pair of reasonable hearing aids only after I started to transition, so I'm transitioning in more than one way is like, [Laughter]—

Ortiz: How come?

Thomas: You know what it is? Even in this great city, the insurance used to pay only for the cheapest, most blah hearing aids, and I couldn't get anything better. And then I think between a number of insurance changes, and then I talked to [inaudible] made a recommendation that I switch to this insurance instead, which I have now. I got just the right, you know, things in order to get them. And I walked in the door, I got my hearing test done, and I'm like wow.

Ortiz: Good for you.

Thomas: Thanks.

Ortiz: Okay, now, [clears throat], how do you—well you told us a little bit of how you see the world, but how do you think the world sees you?

Thomas: You know, I really don't know, and that's an interesting question. I mean, I know how some people see me because of what they describe or what I think they see me, like for example I think I started the—I hijacked the transgender community page on Facebook, and I put editors on it and it's getting some publicity and people are liking it all, but I get people who message me like, you're like [growling noise] you're like, you shouldn't—and they don't even know me or my gender, like, you're a man. Like, no, I'm a Facebook page on here, [Laughter].

Ortiz: Love it, [Laughter]. That's so clever.
**Thomas:** I'm not sure if you ever watch Doctor Who? I actually created one picture the last time they did The Master, you know, which is an old character they turned into a woman and made it The Mistress. So I made a little picture of that where I put a speech bubble and it says no, I'm a villain, [Laughter].

**Ortiz:** [Laughter]. Oh wow, okay, interesting. So what does it mean to be yourself? To be real, to be authentic?

**Thomas:** You know, I'm still asking that question. I don't think there's a definitive answer. I think in the end though, I think it's just letting you out, all your creativity, all your expression, like for example, the one great thing I started doing, and I must do more of, is I started getting back to my writing and writing a lot more, and people really like—because especially when I started writing about trans experience, it's like wow, yeah, I know what that is. I understand. I connect to it. And it's like, you inspire people that way, and it's like, it's so profound. And no one writes anymore, they do YouTube, [Laughter]. I do YouTube, too. [Laughter].

**Ortiz:** [Laughter]. Okay. And when was the first time that you became aware of gender or sexuality?

**Thomas:** Oh wow, I don't think I'd say this the first time, I think it's more been like, layers. I think I've always been, because from the second you're aware of the world around you, you're sort of aware of these things. Like for example you know the first time I was where I was girly, if you want to call it that, was when I was like four or five, and I saw something in the gum machine which wasn't traditionally for boys or whatever and I just thought, oh, that's so cute, [Laughter], you know, and that's when, because all the sudden you think like oh no, I'm the wrong person for that, [Laughter].

**Ortiz:** Okay.

**Thomas:** And you know, as far as sexuality it's the same thing. I mean, I had my first little puppy crush on a girl when I was like 10, 11? And then I had my first orgasm when I was 12, off a boy, so [Laughter].

**Ortiz:** Okay.

**Thomas:** It comes in layers. All these things are like, generally so intertwined, you just have to like, as you go you learn them.

**Ortiz:** Okay. Okay. Do you identify as gay, bi, heterosexual, trans something?

**Thomas:** Well I sort of identify as this sort of weird, wishy-washy sexuality, [Laughter]. But then I took gender therapy and I got informed by a very good woman named Melissa, and she told me that—generally what people call themselves in my case was sexually fluid, and that is my sexuality is in a constant state of fluidity. Sometimes I wake up gay, sometimes I wake up bi, pan, aromantic, asexual, homoromantic asexual, [Laughter].
Ortiz: Okay.

Thomas: I mean, I've gone from like looking at like someone and appreciating them in a sexual sense to—in another woman—to two seconds later sitting in a hot tub in LA Fitness flirting with a guy. And being romantically attracted to him, so.

Ortiz: Okay. And how do you feel um about safety? Do you have any safety concerns?

Thomas: I partly think I really should. I think in part due to my early years. I'm sort of like, and I've tried to describe this the best I can, but when I think of safety, it's more of a low. It's sort of like, I'm running to get away, but if the bully catches up to me I'm like oh, shit, I'm done in again. So It's not exactly the best frame of mine, but you know.

Ortiz: Have you had any—like what's your experience of going out every day, you know? Are people nice? Are they—

Thomas: Generally speaking, I think people are nice. I think the people who are not nice in general will mind their own business, which I'm not sure is the best thing, but it's better for me that they mind their own business rather than take a baseball be able to to me, but I have especially now that I've transitioned more, had noticed a lot more scenarios, and I'm not always sure whether they're because they're picking up that I'm trans, or they're picking up I'm more feminine. Because I mean, a lot of people will tell you, you know, you're trans. You know, your voice—but the reality is, as you go along in transition, enough queues change in you that people take notice, and when they start really picking you up as feminine, they'll start treating you more like a woman and there have been a few episodes where that's happened and it is um needless to say, interesting. I'm happy to say I'm not that put out by it, because you know, I've dealt with similar by way of disability, so you know, it's just a change of why I'm getting, like, having this hate directed at me, but it's not something I'm unaccustomed to, so.

Ortiz: And how was your transition? How did you get used to others, and others get used—like how did you get used to, you know, I guess you presented as a male before?

Thomas: Yeah, and I've had a couple of people take a look at my older pictures and go, oh that's not—that's you? And they're like—I'm like yeah. And, but you're not wearing make-up, [Laughter].

Ortiz: Right.

Thomas: But yeah, no, I mean, people do notice, and yeah, there are changes. For um some people it's enough to the point that they say like wow, that is a transition. Um, to others it's sort of like, meh, you know?

Ortiz: Right, but do you, like, how did you feel in transition? Did you ever feel scared of going out, scared of people? I know [inaudible] but—
Thomas: Oh God, yeah, I mean, I felt anxious and there was a long time, before I started, I’d actually gotten in a special at LA Fitness, um, local to me. The gym. Because I wanted—they had a pool, and I like my pool, [Laughter], I’m sorry.

Ortiz: Me too.

Thomas: Oh, awesome.

Ortiz: I always join a gym that has a pool. It has to have a pool.

Thomas: Yeah no, I went to Planet Fitness before because it’s cheap, but it’s not worth it without the pool. But yeah, I went through a long time where I was anxious about going, and especially about going and using the pool because I’m like, what if I use the restroom? [Laughter]. I’ll get thrown out or I’ll get like beaten up or—I mean, I had all these things in my mind.

Ortiz: Did you use the women’s, um, dressing room [inaudible]?

Thomas: I finally came to it—what ended up happening is I had to go and what I did was I got my name changed, and I already had my gender change letter, and I got one of those NYC IDs with the new gender name, and it took me about a month to get up the courage, but I went in and I’m like, we’ve got to change this on my record so I can feel comfortable going in there. And he’s like, I don’t know. I said no, I just spoke with someone very reliable earlier, it’s the law, [Laughter].

Ortiz: It’s the law.

Thomas: Yeah, right.

Ortiz: So they—what did they?

Thomas: No they changed it. I mean, it still took me about a week more to go in there, because I’m like [scared, apprehensive noise], but I went in there, and it was basically, it was like my first restroom experience.

Ortiz: Okay.

Thomas: It was built up more in my mind than it was actually going in there, and the irony is all these stages I’d gone through in there I had basically been like that, and each time I pass one, it’s like wow. This is like—

Ortiz: You think it was easier than what you thought, is that what you’re saying?
Thomas: Yeah, but it's more profound than that. It's affirming. It's like, I'm finally home. It's like, I think one of the more significant ones was the um, because the LA Fitness I'm a member of has a pool, a sauna, and—no, a pool, a hot tub, and a sauna in the locker room. So, well what the girls will do a lot is after they get out of like, doing whatever and showering, they'll go right in, just a towel, butt naked into the um sauna and just lay there. And I'm like, no, I can't do that. But I'm finally like, you've got to do it. You're going to have SRS in like, God knows how long, but it's not going to be that much longer, you've got to do something. So I'm like okay. Literally, I think it was like three days before I had the consultation with Justine in June of last year, I literally went in, took my shower after getting out of the pool, wrapped myself in the towel, nothing more, and I walked right in. And I just lay there while other women just walked in and out, and that was actually my thought. I'm like yes, I'm finally home. I'm finally where I belong.

Ortiz: You never had any bad experience with the women's bathroom? Everything was fine, or?

Thomas: Um, I wouldn't say bad-bad. I've had a few like, um, offish experiences. Like for example one time when I was walking out, and older woman was walking in and she had to step back and take a look at the bathroom sign again, just to make sure she was entering the right door. She wasn't mean about it, she still smiled and went in, and I smiled and went out, and we went on our way like anything else, but it's just, you know, that one moment. And then another time in Whole Foods, down around where the World Trade Center is, I was walking into a [inaudible] and this one woman walking out with her daughter gave me sort of an odd look like—and she took her daughter a little bit closer. But this was also earlier on in my transition, and I think a lot of people still feel uneasy with the appearance sometimes.

Ortiz: Right, hmm. Okay. And do you have any, um, do you feel that you had to choose between expressing your gender identity and keeping your economic stability?

Thomas: In a manner of speaking, yeah, especially with trying to like, that I took this late in the game. I mean, it's—and I think this has been true of anything of the transition, transitioning is expensive. It's not cheap. And makeup is sort of the same way. And I've been buying like, the cheapest makeup from the um clearance section at Duane Reade, [Laughter]. And I—the thing is, I barely even go at it. I'm like, do I really have the confidence for this? And like, half the time I'm like, you've got to do it. And I'm like, no! [Laughter].

Ortiz: [Laughter]. Okay.

Thomas: They'll make fun of me! [Laughter].

Ortiz: Okay, um, do you feel like—do you feel seen? So you feel like—you know, how do you feel when you go out?

Thomas: Do I feel seen? That's an interesting—

Ortiz: Yeah, or tell me a time when you feel—
Thomas: I actually feel the sanest and sanest I ever have.

Ortiz: Right? Yeah.

Thomas: Yeah, it's um do I feel sane? That's pretty subjective, but I mean, it's like yeah, in comparison to what I used to be? I mean, God, we're just sitting there like yeah, no, I definitely feel saner.

Ortiz: Okay. And it feels good?

Thomas: It feels awesome. [Laughter].

Ortiz: [Laughter].

Thomas: Good isn't even touching it.

Ortiz: Okay, you seem to be like a very happy person, okay? Have you always been this ha and outgoing and expressive, even before transition, or?

Thomas: Yeah—well no, here's the thing: I've always been relatively a pretty happy person. Outgoing, yeah, I guess, but the problem has been this: The outgoing part was always affected by my disability and not hearing a lot and not being engaged in a conversation a lot takes a lot away from that. And pre-transition, and I'm not sure this is due to hearing or not owning who I was, or a combination of the two, but I wasn't as expressive. So now all that's coming out, and I'm like—

Ortiz: Right. Okay.

Thomas: Give me this life! I want a bite of it!

Ortiz: Is there anything else that you would like to add to this interview about your life and how you feel?

Thomas: I think, yeah, well, I think my life is great, honestly. I come from the 70s. I mean, we couldn't even dream about doing hormones let alone surgery.

Ortiz: Right.

Thomas: And now here I am. I'm like wow, [Laughter]. Um, but I think the one thing I can add to this, and the one thing I took from Janet Mock's thing because I saw through a lot of her story when I read it and listened to it half way through my transition that her transition wasn't straightforward. It was actually a crooked transition.

Ortiz: Right.
Thomas: And that's a lot of the stories I've taken since then. Like, just because your transition isn't straightforward, just because you don't do it when you're younger or you know, it doesn't invalidate you. And I think that's something I take in this life now. It's like okay, I had my SRS. I'm not doing my makeup yet, I haven't had laser or electrolysis, but I'm on the road to transition, it doesn't have to be straight or in order. It just has to be, you know, something I can do in the time I can do it.

Ortiz: Right. Okay.

Thomas: And I think that's the most powerful thing. And I think, you know, if someone is listening to this, that should be the one thing they should take from it. Yeah, you are who you are, and you need to go where you're going, but it doesn't have to be straight and perfect. It can be crooked and imperfect, and especially crooked and imperfect, because that's when you have the most fun, [Laughter].

Ortiz: Oh my God, we're here, [Laughter]. Okay.

Thomas: [Laughter].

Ortiz: Okay. Now if you wanted people to hear one thing from you, what would it be?

Thomas: Love yourself. I mean, it's the simplest thing to say, and most people know it, but they don't understand it, and I think if one thing saved my life throughout all of this, it's being able to internalize that somehow, somewhere, and just keep remembering it. Because when you're like, in a desperate state of mind, no matter what it's caused by, that one thing could get you through.


Thomas: Oh wow, we're at the end? [Laughter, clapping]. We made it! Give me five!