NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

https://www.nycransoralhistory.org/
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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

RIC TENENBAUM

Interviewer: Jeanne Vaccaro

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Jean Vaccaro: Hello, my name is Jean Vaccaro and I will be having a conversation with Ric Tennenbaum 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 August 2nd, and this is being recorded in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Hello Ric.

Ric Tennenbaum: Hi.

Vaccaro: How are you?

Tennenbaum: Good, today.

Vaccaro: Good! So, I would love to start with some basic information. Can you tell me your age, where you're from, and your gender pronouns?

Tennenbaum: Yeah, uh, I'm 22, I'm from Los Angeles, California, and right now I use they/them. I'm starting to lean into possibly using she/her, but right now they/them.

Vaccaro: Okay—

Tennenbaum: [inaudible]

Vaccaro: would you like to talk about that process of expanding pronoun usage?

Tennenbaum: Sure, um—

Vaccaro: —What that thought process is like?

Tennenbaum: Yeah, uh, so the first time it happened is, uh, when I was in high school, I think it was my junior year so I was sixteen, maybe—um, oh maybe it was earlier than that... it was earlier than that. It was early high school. Um, I started getting involved with an activist campaign running out of the LGBTQ center in LA [Los Angeles], um, called Get Empathy, um, and the people who were leading it are now part of the relational center and they've detached themselves. Um, but, there was a really cool campaign where we were—I don't really like the name Get Empathy—but the whole point was to gather people together and have them share personal narratives in small groups, um, to just build understanding across different lines, and also the practice of sharing narrative and being deep and real with each other. Um—

Vaccaro: Like consciousness raising?

Tennenbaum: Yes, exactly. Um, and then it was also fun just because it was about how to craft your story very quickly and all these different versions. Um, so we'd go into groups and we kept on going into all these, like, queer youth spaces and running those kinds of workshops. And I suppose as I was surrounded with more and more queerness, um, I wanted to flirt more and more with they pronouns so I started using he/they. Um, I wasn't really sure why but I was just
like, “That sounds kinda nice.” No one used “they”. Um, that’s where I was at. And then I think I kind of dropped it after—after moving out of that space because, when I wasn’t presenting myself in front of queer audiences, it didn’t really make sense to announce my pronouns. Um, and then some time around my—halfway through my second year of college I think, um, or maybe it was towards the beginning, um, I started to realize that “he”, um, s—well first it was “sir” and “man” really just started grating on me. Every time I heard it, it was, um, off. Um, and I started to resent it more and more and more and then I kind of spread into the “he” realm and every time I heard it it was just like, a little bit of pang. And at first I wasn’t sure if it was, like, do I just don’t like that people are assuming gender? Is that the problem? Um, is it not, like, me but rather more like a broader, like, philosophical thing? Um, but then when it stopped—when it, you know, kept on getting worse and worse I was like, “Does it matter? Even if it is like a more philosophical thing? Um, it’s going to make me feel better, maybe.” Um, and I was also taking, um, a Trans Studies class with, uh, AJ Lewis who’s also part of the project. That’s why I’m brought onto the Trans Oral History Project. Um, and in his class I learned about all these different formations and understandings of trans and gender nonconformity. Um, and, you know it doesn’t have to be a, “Oh, I felt this way my entire life it’s like this core being that’s so certain...” Um, and that, like, freedom to be uncertain and still go for a change of gender, um, helped me a lot. So then I started going by they/them. And, um, I was at Grinnell College, which is like a small liberal arts college in central Iowa, um, of, like, sixteen hundred people. Uh, we like to think we’re very, you know, leftist if not liberal, um, or I guess the opposite. Um, and, so like, gender pronouns were actually, like, really, really respected there and, um, I struggled because in my head I kept on misgendering myself for about a year. Um, and I was like, damn it, does that mean that, like, it’s not really true? But then I’m like, okay no. I refer to myself more than anyone else in my life, uh, with my little inner voice. So it’s fine. Um, and I guess I felt pretty comfortable there. Um, when people use it, it feels, like, mostly right. Um, but because it’s never, like, fit totally, part of me wants to now think about flirting with “she”. Um, and I don’t know if that would actually help. Um, I’m thinking about trying it with some friends. Um...but...

Vaccaro: So when you say you misgendered yourself for about a year, do you mean in your head or when you spoke to people and expressed yourself to others?

Tennenbaum: Yeah, um, I think when I vocalized it, I was pretty consistent in using they, um, it was just my, like, inner voice—inner monologue. And—and it got especially bad when I was referring to myself in my own head from someone else's point of view. So, like, imagining someone else refer to me. Um, that's when most of the misgendering happened, which was a weird aspect. And then I started to get mad at, like, other people when they were just in my head. Um, and then I think I grew a lot of sensitivity around it because of that. Because I was getting so mad at myself and misgendering myself through other people that when they, like, even hesitated a little bit, um, I kind of seized up.

Vaccaro: So you describe, having a pang, or a resentment when people misgendered you. Do you think you could say more about that?

Tennenbaum: Yeah, um...it's like, mmm...
Vaccaro: Maybe just to even add to that? You talked about the idea that gender doesn't have to be a sense of an essential or core part of one's self, but at the same time there are real discomforts, especially in the social, that were coming out. So I'm interested in how you're thinking about that relationship.

Tennenbaum: Mmm, yeah. Um, so it's—it's a bit of a game I think I have to play, in that a lot of the times, like I very much understand that my presentation in mostly going to be read as boy. Um, and so I kind of, like, try and do more forgiveness around that. Um, but then the pang is just really annoying when, like, I got to, like, a gay bookshop or something or like a cafe and like I know everyone in there's, you know, queer. Um, and then I'm in a skirt with, like—you know, like, a high-waisted skirt and I have my backpack and there's a little button on it that has my pronouns on the front with a little, like, nonbinary flag and then still, like um, "Oh yeah get him, like, a latte." [inaudible] Um, and—and there the pang is just, like, how much harder do I have to try? Um, and then it's like this, um, goal that maybe I'll never reach. Which is, perhaps, why I'm attracted to she now. Um, I feel like I just have to keep on pushing more into the deep femme just to get back to, like, a nonbinary reading. Um, so the pang I would say is a driver towards, um...some level of passable femininity. Um, and yeah it—it is weird that I don't think of it as a core self, but it still hurts and I think it has to do with, like, the repetition of it, um, because few other of my identities are called out explicitly. Um, even like race which, you know, I feel like I often get, like, subtle touchings of—of like, okay I can tell when I'm being, like, read as white or latinx. Um, I kind of get those brief glimpses but it's not explicit. It's never for sure. [Truck horn in background] Um, yeah.

Vaccaro: Mm...could you talk about the way, uh, your racial identity or, kind of, class markers or things that do as, you say, kind of subtly touch, um, to the surface are felt in relationship to gender?

T: Yeah. Um, I definitely—so I grew up, um, middle class and then for a stint I was definitely in an upper class kind of, um, life. And I would say still, like, upper-middle class. Um, and I still get financial support from my parents, so definitely still in that tier. Um, and I feel like, oftentimes, like, that's presented in the clothing I wear, um, and the accessories I carry. Um, and then I'm half Chinese but, like, almost nobody gets that—half Chinese, half White—um, I'm mostly read as either White or, like, vaguely latinx. Which is really funny when, like, I worked retail for a while at the cashier. It was always these, like um, Latina grandmothers who would, like, insist on, um, like their—oftentimes as like their grandchildren would want to, like, order for them to me in English, because they only spoke Spanish, uh but then they would insist that they knew that I spoke Spanish. And then when they would hear my, like, god awful accent [small chuckle] I'd get, like, these nasty looks of like, "Ugh, you're—you're a bad Spanish speaker—[chuckle] like, bad heritage." I'm like, that's not even fair [laughing]. Um...I—I struggle with knowing where—what I'm being judged on. Especially, it's like, it's been very apparent the summer living in Crown Heights Brooklyn. Um, where it's, like, definitely a lower income neighborhood—I think it's one of the three lowest income neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Um, and, it's, uh...like...almost all Black and then White Hasidic Jew—Jewish, um, specifically I think it's [inaudible]. And I, like, really can't tell walking around how I'm being perceived. Whether it's
just, like, the fact that I'm White and don't look Hasidic Jew, so like, I'm a bit of an outlier there. Um, or that I'm, like, wearing a skirt and have a beard. Um, or the fact that it looks like I have money. Um, but regardless, I definitely feel estranged a little bit and I—I know that people are a bit uncomfortable, but I also know that, like, that Whiteness and money shields me from a lot of shit that I would otherwise get for wearing a skirt. Um, so it's like...I think people don't engage me on the street as much, uh, because of, like, the mixture of those three, um, which makes me alienated but at the same time I'm not receiving shit very often, which I'm grateful for—so, I don't know. Honestly, sometimes, like, um, because I feel like I'm, like, denied a feminine look a lot of the time and I especially get annoyed when, like—I don't know I think it was like Teen Vogue or something where like "Oh yeah, look at these boys wearing skirts. It's, like, fashion now." That pissed me off because I'm like, I—I don't want to be like one of those like white hipster boys wearing a skirt for, like, a fashion and a statement. [Pen clicking] Um, because then I feel like that brings me farther from the femininity too. Um, so...I had a point there...um—yeah, okay, [pen clicking] sometimes I really wish I would get almost, like, cat-called more or harassed or just something because it's an indicator that, on some level, my femininity is working. Um, and I don't know if it's, like, mostly that or, like, my, you know, more masochistic desires, um, at play, to just kind of get beat up a little bit, but, it's also never happened to me, um...

V: How do you understand your fashion which, I can opt for our listeners, is excellent. [chuckles]—

T: [chuckles] Thank you.

V: —in relationship to your gender, racial, and class identity and how that has evolved from, what sounds like, a very, you know, a young kind of high school experience growing up in Los Angeles as a part of a queer community to being in college in a very small, kind of rural White space, and then being in New York City this summer—

T: Right—

V: —and how you're talking a lot about how people look at you and how it feels to be s—sometimes seen and sometimes unseen. And I'm wondering what your relationship to your—your amazing fashion sense and your clothes is and how that kind of helps or protects or arms you in certain kinds of ways.

T: Well, um, so Grinnell in undergrad is where I really started, like, flirting around with different fashion styles. Um, and I attribute a lot of that to the fact that the Grinnell campus is a bit of a bubble within the town, um, and oftentimes you'll go, like, maybe a couple weeks without ever really leaving the campus. Um, and it's like a bunch of, like, pretty nonjudgmental weirdos. Um, so I had a lot of chances to play with just like really terrible and ugly looks that I kind of had fun with [chuckles] doing. And I'll—I'll still pull them out every now and then, just like ridiculous clashings and I'll call it "post modern." Um...so—so that gave me a lot of room to play and experiment. Um, then coming to New York City, um, it's this weird combination of seen and not seen where I feel, like, so many New Yorkers are just, like, they don't really give a shit and
they just, like, look past you because there's so many wacky people all the time on all the streets so it's just like "okay whatever."

V: Does that feel good? Or...

T: Um, because there's that but then also because there are so many people I definitely get a lot more stares and, um, comments. Um, I'm pretty adept at, like, ignoring those. Um, I waffle depending on, like, time of day and what my outfit is, um, of whether or not I should tune in for safety reasons or tune out for just lack of anxiety reasons. Um, it's, uh,... I like it. I really like the mix. Um, I like that not everybody comments and I also like that, um, I do get some feedback even if it is kind of negative. Uh, because in the fall I was in Amsterdam, um, studying for a semester. And there everyone...first of all, gender nonconformity was not part of mainstream media, even in, like, University, in the way that it is here. Um, so they also—it's a gender language, Dutch, um so there weren't, um—and they hadn't really developed gender neutral pronouns. Um, so there—also [car honks] by, like, social norms, I just got stared at. But, like, these very silent stares. But they were—they were heavy. No one would say shit, but just everyone would kind of, like, keep their eyes fixed on me. Um, that was extremely uncomfortable. I hated that. I much prefer either, like, not looking or, like, look and make some kind of comment. Because then I know exactly where I stand. Like, if they're just, like, talking about me to someone, I don't feel like I'm a threat. Um, if they start talking directly to me in a threateningly way I know to leave.

V: Can we talk a little about Grinnell College—

T: Yeah.

V: —and your experience, you mention taking a trans cities course, and kind of thinking about the experience of gender nonconformity personally, politically, and intellectually. And what it feels like to kind of experiment, think, expand in that bubble as you described it and how that has influenced you.

T: Mm, yeah...um, I think studying the politics of gender and gender nonconformity, um, has confused me in a lot of ways, um, some liberating. Um, especially around—I think somewhere during the course I got this idea of political trans-ness, um, so sort of, like, a strong divorce of the narr—from the narrative of, like, some essential self to "I'm going to do this for visibility reasons and for just, like, mucking up gender binary. Um, and some days, like, I really rely on that because some days I just don't feel trans enough or even trans, and I kind of lose that like sense of self. And then what keeps me going is like, okay, but I can still feel good today if I, like, put on a skirt, have my painted nails, and still have other masc identifiers on my body and then walk around a park and like have kids see me. Because I know as a kid—and even still today—that brightens my day. You know, I don't see it enough and I really like that. So, just that act, even if I'm not, like, feeling that that's my essential core-self coming through, I feel like that's an okay formation of trans. Um, so I go with that. I know a lot of people would, like, push back on that idea, um, of like, you know, appropriating trans identity for some political movement. Uh, but I see it as a way of getting by on some days where the gender moves. Um, so Grinnell
opened that door to me.20:00 Um...I think over the past four years I've been there, there's been so much more n—nonbinaries and agender and gender nonconformity coming out. Um, I think when I was a first-year there was, like, a third-year there, um—and right now I'm a third-year, so this was two years ago—um, and for them, they had been the only, um, gender nonconforming trans person at the school. And now what we're seeing—and they came out, like, while they were in school—and now what we're seeing is, like, first-year classes are coming in and there's already, like, a little handful of gender nonconforming students. So, it's been, like, radically changing and the numbers on our campus have been growing, like, at what feels like an exponential rate. Like, it's gone from, like, oh there's a couple people to now, in most of my classes there's someone. Um—

V: How do you account for that?

T: I think it's the language and the concept of gender nonconformity is around more, it's on the internet [car honks]you know, like, easy click-bait things like Buzzfeed are reporting on it pretty regularly. Um, so I think for high school kids, um, they get that exposure and they see it and they see it often. It's not just, like, a one off thing that seems like a weird thing that's maybe inaccessible. But rather there are models and there are m—many more faces that people can identify with. Um, I think that's really exciting. Um, there's, like, a very selfish part of me every time that's, like, "Oh, I'm less special," [laughs] if I'm totally honest. But it—it's always, it's always good to grow the cohort.

V: Do you think that the— I wonder if at Grinnell, there's a culture in every class and in the dorms to give gender pronouns th— that kind of space has made available publicly? Is that true?—

T: Yeah...

V: —And do you think if so, does that—how does that influence the kind of ability for people to form community—

T: Mm...

V: —and experience recognition or maybe, uh, as you said even sometimes a kind of frustration around the way communities grow, the shape that they take, the speed with which they move; how to find, kind of, coalition amongst a kind of a rapidly growing, uh, recognized kind of field, or change in language.

T: Mm...so, first I'll talk about how pronouns are, like, navigated—

V: Mm hmm...

T: —and then on community. So first, pronouns, um, our school's been, like, trying to modify this, and the student body has been also trying to modify it for the past, like, number of years. Um, so now, like, we teach—like, during new student orientation we go around the room and
have people say pronouns, um, which you know there's a learning curve to if someone's never even heard "gender pronoun" before. And they're like, "What—why are we doing this?" Um, and then we've had, like, scuffles around um, you know, should we even go around the room in introductions and say pronouns because it's really just putting pressure on the trans and nonconforming students to out themselves, in a way. Um, but some of them want that platform. Um, so I had a gender studies professor this past year, Leah Allen, um—who just got tenure track, happily—um and, we uh decided that, in the class, we would—like, never announce pronouns for anyone and, including authors, we would just use they for all. Um, which, like, I was fine with because that conformed to me, um but that was also a sore spot because, um, especially trans girls, um, who like fought for that kind of visibility, didn't want to be reduced back to, like, some androgynous form. Um, so we still don't know how to do that. Um, in my spaces I say, "You can, um—we'll go around and do pronouns only if you're comfortable sharing it." Um, and then—which is nice because, like, a lot of cis people forget to do pronouns anyway, so there's like this balance of people, you now, pleading the fifth in a way, for various reasons and no one actually knows. Um, so I like that.24:37 Um, it's like, there's a space on everyone's door for pronouns. Um, most people don't use it, um, but mostly trans or nonconforming people use it. And it's cool because you know, especially if you're walking down a new area and you see, like, they pronouns, like, ah! [Chuckles] Maybe I should talk to you! Um, and so that's where the community formation comes in. You'd think that at a small college of sixteen hundred, and a queer community of maybe—okay we're a pretty queer school, but I would say, I don't know, two hundred students, maybe? Um, you'd think that community formation would happen, especially because we even have like a space for it, called the Stonewall Resource Center, um but it's really fractured in trying. Um, we had a trans advocacy group, but it was mostly afab [assigned female at birth] people which felt quite alienating. It was also, like, all the queer groups were incredibly white except for the [inaudible] group. Um, so it was very stratified in that way.

Vaccaro: Did you join either group?

Tennenbaum: Uh, yes. And, um...

Vaccaro: Which one?

Tennenbaum: [inaudible] timing didn't work for me. I've also had a trying relationship with race because on one end I'm trying to embrace Chinese culture, and like, I have a lot of memories with it and experience with it, um, and it feels erased all the time, but also I'm like, okay most of the time I have white-passing privilege, um, what does that mean [inaudible]? Um, I've been told I'm welcome, everyone's been very welcoming, um, but that's my own thing I have to get over. Um, so I went to one of those meetings and then the trans advocacy group, I went to a few, but without people who know how to facilitate a group well, and I think that's the case on most college campuses, um it can turn into a fest of complaining and then people like you know, someone shares one story of being hurt in this way and someone else shares another story of being hurt in this way. Um, which I think is good, to be able to voice that with people who understand. Um, but it becomes, very unproductive very fast when it's just a lot of people voicing negatives and complaints without having a space to work through things and
maybe explore like what solutions—and maybe there aren't solutions, but just the act of like attending to one person at a time I think is really important. Um, so I'm actually trying, at my school, to—because I have background in peer support therapy and group facilitation—um, I'm trying to teach people, like, practices to take. Like, if someone just shared a very deep story then someone else is trying to relate to them, but then goes into their own deep story, it's kind of like this person who just shared that first one is now feeling kind of like exposed and vulnerable and they didn't actually get feedback. Because now the attention on someone else. Um, so trying to intervene on that, um, and that gets frustrating especially when I don't lead the group I don't feel like I have the authority to butt in so I don't go to many. Um, yeah it's hard to find community because it is a small place and people have their small friend groups. It's mostly because like all the queer people are very different. No one actually, you know, wants to be friends with each other just based on, "Oh, you're nonbinary too? Okay, what do you like? Oh, we have no interests in common."

Vaccaro: Have you experienced, at Grinnell, what has been sort of reported in the media and in the left, a kind of anxiety around PCness [political correctness] and the way that gender has been handled? And I'm sure you've read about what happened at Reed College with Kimberly Pierce's visit, who directed "Boys Don't Cry?" Did you read about it?

Tennenbaum: I don't know anything about that.

Vaccaro: Oh, okay. We don't have to talk about it. But she came to a visit and there was a big protest against her by students. And there's been sort of a conflict in the media around what's PC, what's censorship, and kind of a policing surveillance around language, you know, at quite liberal or left schools.

Tennenbaum: Yeah, Grinnell's definitely cut-throat. Um, one of uh my professors calls it the Grinnell Smack down. Um, where someone says something and then someone jumps in rather aggressively to educate them on the proper way to speak and to talk about an issue. Um, this is a big problem especially, you know, because I think it frightens a lot of first-years and then it drives them into this—and then drives them into this same culture of like, oh okay we have to keep on policing because it's the proper way and all these older students are telling us. Um, and like I think that's extremely fucked up when there's like a huge education gap that isn't the students' fault. Like, people shouldn't have been expected you know through high school especially if they're carrying, like, multiple jobs to support their family, of like reading articles on everything under the sun and then keeping up with the change of language. Um, so, um, I was an RA for a couple years and I even, like, printed out this little sheet of like all these like fun, you know, terms, all these buzzword-y terms that everyone likes to use and I explained, like, the Grinnell context in which everyone uses and understands them. So, like, someone doesn't get, like, totally reamed at the lunch table for, um, talking about reverse racism. Which is like, yes let's—let's address that but you don't have to like made out to be—you know, to be an ignorant, like, fool. Um, It definitely happens. It happens in classrooms a lot especially like Intro to [Sociology]. Um, it's a bit of a shit show. I think, um...I like it when professors or students intervene when someone's saying problematic things, um, by more explaining the concepts behind them instead of relying on terminology. So, perhaps, what's an
example?...Um...like if someone uses the term “transvestite”—because that's all they've ever heard—when trying to talk about a trans issue and then someone you know completely—say, like, they made a point of, "Oh, I heard that, um, you know transvestites are like getting like now have like healthcare under Grinnell College. That's great." Um, and then they'd get, like, destroyed by someone like, "You can't say transvestite! That's a totally offensive word! You need to say trans or transgender. That's proper." Um, you know instead you know taking a send and being, like, "Yeah I agree, that's great. By the way, um, now most people prefer trans or transgender. Um, transvestite is a bit dated and can be offensive." But that doesn't happen. Um, and I think it's like a point of pride and a point of liberal pride to get those brownie points and being the first person to call them out viciously, um, and educate them very quickly. Even though a lot of people don't even understand the terms, um, and also they're like gate keeping on these terms that will probably change in five years. I think AJ once called Tumblr the alien, um, queen who births new trans-lingo every, like, two years. [Laughs] and I think that's pretty accurate.

**Vaccaro:** How would you kind of situate your experience as an intern here at the New York City Trans Oral History Project where you have been going out and interviewing all kinds of trans and gender non conforming folks, hearing their story, organizing panels and events, and listening to people talk about language and the elasticity of language over the course of several decades including decades in which you were probably very young or possibly not even, um, here with us on this Earth. And I'm curious if—how that experience of being in a different context then the classroom space has influenced your thinking and how you might bring those kinds of observations back with you to the classroom or how they've influenced your own kind of understanding?

**Tennenbaum:** That's a good question. Um, so in my studies, um, one thing that I've been, like, very careful to try and attend to has been this knowledge that you know, a lot of these terms around especially gender, um even with like the turn of, um, in Spanish, Latin accents and stuff. A lot of those are coming from White academia. And a lot of people who are living with the brunt of the violence, like, probably don't identify with those terms or, you know. Um, so, when I study it, I try to always remember, like, especially if I'm like looking at interviews and stuff, and like first-person accounts, um, or like if we have guest speakers come in who aren't from academia, um, to try and figure out the context of the language they're using. Um, and this is one of the first times where I've actually been able to do that in practice, um, which has been really exciting. Um, I've never heard "transsexual" used, so much, and I quite like that word. Um, especially because, like, with its medical formations, I have an interest in cyborgy-ness. Um, so I think that's fun. I like the monstrosity that can sometimes be in it. Um, and it embraces monstrosity.

**Vaccaro:** Can you say more about that?

**Tennenbaum:** Yeah, because it calls attention to, like, medical cuts, interventions, transformation, um and I kind of like the, um...I don't know I feel for the Frankenstein's Monster. Um, I think, oh there's some famous article [inaudible] that did it for me. Um, and then...yeah...um...
Vaccaro: So you were saying you haven't heard the word "transsexual" used so much as this summer talking to real people?

Tennenbaum: Yeah and it tends to be, like, um...like I've understood that it's more in generational lines. Like it seems to be people perhaps thirty-plus, um, use "transsexual" a lot more. Like, one of the questions I always ask people, is like, "When was the first time you heard the word 'transgender'? What did it mean to you?" And, you know, hearing people's thoughts and how they've grappled with that language shift and, still held on to "transsexual" for all these various reasons, um, a lot of that resonated with me. And I was like, "Oh, shit. Maybe I actually, like, identify in some ways more with transsexual." Or, like, I want to identify with it and move more towards that. Um, and that's when the revelation of, "Oh, maybe, like, the terms I like more have just fallen out of funk but I can still use them," and go for that. I'm, like, very very grateful to not have to deal with some of the supreme policing that was, like, in place. Um, I've heard a few people talk on "femme queen" and how that used to be like um an understanding around the nineties and the eighties. Um, and that seemed like so much pressure especially because it was, like, a ball category—a femme queen—and you're literally graded on a scale of one to ten how passable you are and if you're not, then maybe you're just not a femme queen, um, and then not trans. And it's like, shit! No one puts that like I have the liberty to like claim an in between category and I still feel like like that impostor [inaudible]. Um, but I also understand how that intense—it creates, like, this boundary and then you have to have a certain intensity to get into that femme queen scene and then once you're there, I think there's a stronger familial community thing of like, we're all like really just putting it all out there to go for it. Um, and I think that's part of the apathy of community formation around genderqueer. Um, because I think a lot of people now—it's beautiful, they don't actually change, a lot of people I know who are—who have started identifying as genderqueer don't actually change their physical presentation or their gender presentation. And so it's more of a—I guess for most people who interact with them it's like a linguistic thing. It's a just a linguistic change. And I now understand how sort of that resentment okays in, um, from older trans folks of, like, um, not really doing anything and then just playing these linguistic games. Um, because it's a totally different experience.

Vaccaro: Yeah, or maybe that the dooming happens in different spheres and one that has different kinds of consequences.

Tennenbaum: Absolutely.

Vaccaro: Do you have any thoughts about trans asterisk[*] and the language of it?

Tennenbaum: Um...

Vaccaro: It's kind of one that's already come and gone:
Tennenbaum: Yeah, um, when I first heard it I was like, "Okay that makes sense." But then as I read a couple critiques I'm, like, "Oh yeah, I do think that's pretty silly." Um, it's like, I get it as kind of a bridge to the elasticity of language but no one wants to see an asterisk.

Vaccaro: I can't even say the word. I'm not sure if it's as-ter-ick or -risks or...it's kind of convoluted.

Tennenbaum: Plus, talk about overtly academic.[Laughing]...no!

Vaccaro: So, you have been interviewing quite a lot of people, um, elder trans folks, and I'm wondering if you and talk about that experience especially how it relates to the experience that you brought through peer counseling and your previous work with trauma that you had talked about earlier.

Tennenbaum: Um, yeah. I thought that there would be more overlap with my experience in mental health support. Especially, like, you know I worked for a crisis hotline for a while and worked on story craft a lot for suicide prevention purposes, um, so I was very used to receiving very traumatic stories. This was very, very different, there was in both fields, both interviewing this summer and hearing life stories and then also receiving crisis calls, um, I think they both play these themes of heavy trauma, vulnerability to talk about it, . But then also if it's successful, if it's a particularly good call or story, um, we move into moments of strength and end up laughing at some point. The difference has been that with—when I was on the crisis hotline it was a teen line. So it was a teen-to-teen crisis hotline. So my connection with other people were like, okay we're both teens and so I can understand a lot of these feelings. How like one thing feels like the entire world. Um, especially if it's like a first depression. Like, there's no way to understand that it'll pass. Um, so I really understood that. That was the connection of like basically like a teen thing and world view. Um, but interviewing trans people. when they talk about trauma directly related to, like, presentation and transphobic violence, it feels like I'm—it's hard because it's like sending a warning to me. Um, whereas before I could just relate because I'd gone through it, but now this was more like looking into a crystal ball. Especially talking to all these people about job discrimination, and often the most common topic that's avoided is current employment because there's still that fear of what it's going to do if it's out. And as someone who's considering moving into more femme presentation—and I don't necessarily want to pass as a woman. It's disheartening, it's a bit of a grind. I think it gives me a lot of hope that a lot of the people I interview, like I see so much strength in it. I aspire to a lot of the achievements and activism that they've done. But at the same time, it's...you know, it's expressively not easy. So that's been really tough especially moving into my last year of college where I'm supposed to figure out job stuff, you know? I have to choose my path pretty wisely I think if I also want to pursue another gender presentation.

Vaccaro: Do you think that—and I know you're still really in the midst of it—but interviewing people and talking to people, can you begin to observe how, if at all, it is affected or impacted or influenced your own sense of self?
Tennenbaum: Um, yeah it's definitely—I mean, before the summer, I wasn't...I never voiced the desire or, like, creeping desire to maybe go for she pronouns. After this summer, I am. I feel like I'm just feeling a lot closer with trans family, with folks who have talked to me who have opened up and shared their hearts with me. Um, and I suppose it's...I don't know I still have this idea that being deeper in trans-ness means being farther away from my gender assigned at birth. Um, which I'm trying to get away from because I don't think that's a helpful thought and I think it's not accurate. But it's kind of a way of coping and feeling more affinity. Um, it's also like, kind of fun I think, um, to start playing with things on more intense levels and seeing what happens. Um...

Vaccaro: Speaking of making things more intense, would you be interested in talking about, kind of, states of consciousness and changing consciousness in relationship to drugs, alcohol, dance, music, nightlife, all these kinds of things that can bring us, like gender, into other states of consciousness and if that has been part of your experience?

Ric Tennenbaum: One of my favorite activities is to be dressed, like, super faggy, and then going out into like a fairly normative kind of dance party and umm...be on some kind of drug. Uhh...because... it's like... I have very little interest in playing the respectable trans, umm and I think being on...like visibly being on drugs, uhh at a dance event, looking non conforming, umm makes people go through like several phases of thought if they want to try and like think about me? Because, on the one hand, they're like, oh look at this fool it like oh, it looks like they're having a lot of fun. Are they just drugged out and weird, is that why they're dressed that way? Is it something else? And then like why are they alone dancing on drugs? And it's like hmm... Hmm... I feel like it inspires several layers of thought of what respectability is and what levels of sobriety, how sobriety ties into gender presentation. And then that reminds me of how when like I suppose it's just like cross dressing parties and drag parties that like I think are pretty typical for liberal arts colleges. Those tend to be some of the more drunk affairs. And I don't think that something to be shied away from. I don't think that being non sober in whatever ways in order to feel more fluid in a different gender presentation, I don't think that's like escapism just like being in a, you know it isn't an alternate reality in a way but I...that doesn't discredit it. I think it's very inspiring to see people do that. And I've noticed that, a while ago, I did an acid trip with a couple friends and 1 of them, I hadn't been out with my pronouns even though I been out to my school for a couple years, I just often don't tell people. It has to do with like being more disappointed if someone messes up after I tell them than if they just never knew. And they kept on like throughout the entire like day, I was being referred to as he but I didn't care, like there was no sting, there was no burden, it just kind of moved through me because like that gender idea had no place in my trip. And I was so happy. And the takeaway was not that like ohh, now I have to be like high if I don't care, the takeaway was that there's that potential in me and I can move towards it. And it's now this light that can be achieved because I did it. And...---

Jeanne Vaccaro: You have a memory of it. You have an account of it.

Tennenbaum: I do, exactly. I witnessed it, yes.
Vaccaro: Would you say that, you mentioned kind of and interest in not pathologing the idea of non sobriety and kind of thinking about possibility and potential or even the kind of an ecstaticness that might be available through altering reality perhaps through uh... substances. And I wonder if there's, if you think of these experiences being open or if you are attempting toward some kind of position of possibility or the ecstatic.

Tennenbaum: What do you mean by openness?

Vaccaro: If you have a kind of directionality that you're thinking about or orienting yourself or if it's an open field of possibility towards the positive, towards the negative, whatever it might be.

Tennenbaum: Gotcha. I think defnielty before say smoking a spliff or something like that, maybe, definitely some of the times, I do I have a place where I would like to work towards while I'm in that headspace. Definitely before more intense psychedelic trips, I might have some ideas of what I would like to think about or go towards. But of course, I think an openness has to exist there because like I'm probably not going to get there. But the fact of it was that there was an intent and maybe I can move towards it. I find that with weed, it often moves in opposite directions of where I'd like it to. I become incredibly introspective and I think about, I make all of these connections that are poorly thought out. And I get on myself for them and then I'll wake up from a nap and be like oh I'm okay. I think a lot of the potential isn't just, even if there are a lot of poorly formed thoughts or loose connections, that shouldn't be there. Just the exercise of making all these wacky different connections, it really breaks tunnel thought where I'm like keep on thinking oh it has to move this one way, I have to move towards this one thing in order to be okay. And even it shows me different ways of not being okay that are sometimes interesting because then if I'm feeling depressed, they have more ways to move into instead of the same cycle of thoughts. So even that can be useful. I feel like I didn't totally get at your question.

Vaccaro: No I think you're talking about different strategies toward not just mental health which is kind of a small category, right? But just the experience of emotions and how you might use or think about drug uses one of the vehicles through which to manage different kinds of experiences and feelings.

Tennenbaum: Yes, yeah. And also like on the umm the question of like tapping into different potentials by using substances, I don't think that hormones are too different. And this has been very liberating for me to think about because if I want to try something umm, it doesn't have to go to a specific end. I could, you know, I think that there's, perhaps, a lot to be gained from just experimenting a little bit. Or even not at all just like imagining it through different ways?? And then noticing where that takes me. Umm like perhaps if I try different ways of modifying my body like tucking, or like um I think I thought my nails were super pretty the first times I started painting them and when I was high I like really really lit up in smile and I'm like this is really fun and it became not even gendered it was just like I like this color and I like that it's on me. Um, and, so in that way I was able to detach something that to me before had been extremely gendered to just a form of play. So not when I think about it, I don't feel bad that my
nails aren't painted when I'm trying to be femm because I'm just like no, I'm not in that kind of playful mood today, but if I wanna be playful I can do it.

**Vaccaro:** And the things out of the sphere of gender into the sphere of the aesthetic or the playful.

**Tennenbaum:** Yes, exactly.

**Vaccaro:** In speaking also of alterations to the body is there anything you wanna say that you've thought of, in terms of taking or not taking hormones or doing different kinds of interventions to the body.

**Tennenbaum:** Yeah, umm, Mckenzi Reynolds kind of rocked my world when I interviewed them a couple weeks ago. I highly recommend listening to that one. Umm, I very selfishly asked a question that was directed at me umm, for advice, on the record and it was...if you had any advice for like especially young people who may feel like desire for some medical body modification transition but aren't certain, the response was umm...you might always be uncertain. You know, it might never really crystalize into this yes I totally want this and everything that comes with it...and that's okay. You can still go for it, just understand what's perhaps more difficult to reverse and what's not reversible, and if you have that information, follow desire. And, that, I think that has a lot of resonances with exploring substances. I might be uncertain about how it's gonna go. You know, there's always a possibility that it just fricken' sucks or that I get nothing and I just feel a little fried after. Umm, but, if there's a desire that's pushing me towards it, what I've learned, through multiple experiences is that, in the end I'm happy I've had them, and like the rougher ones that I wanted to get out of...I'm happy I had them 'cause there was something to get from it. And so if that results in like, me wanting like, different hair formations on my body or just like a different feeling, and I end up with like, chest growth that I later decide is not right for me, that's not the end of the world.

**Vaccaro:** Have you encountered or interfaced with any medical or mental help, kind of, infrastructures, doctors, around gender-related care?

**Tennenbaum:** No, I'm extremely scared of that. I have friends that I can consult with like, who's good. Very few people I know have someone who's good on the gender front. And this is actually kept me out of therapy for the past few years, like I've known that I should definitely be seeing a therapist at this point for like things beyond gender, but because I know gender is gonna have to play a some part in that discussion, I don't wanna pay someone a few hundred dollars over a few weeks just to get to a certain point and then have them be bad. Um, so I..yeah, that like, potential of things falling apart which I think it the norm, to happen when people wanna talk about trans stuff, especially in uh like small town Iowa. Iowa's fiftieth out of fifty states for mental health care and services. So then trying to find a specialist, you know, it's just not there. So, yes, things like that. And I know a lot of this stuff happens to my friends too, not to mention the basic costs of it, has kept a lot of us out of therapy which has made it so crucial that we have this sort of like affinity groups to talk about things. But then again, because we don't actually have the training to field such a group therapy session, I think a lot of people end
up feeling worse going out of those groups. I think the solution there, again, there's a lot of pushes at my college to get better therapists, to get, like, ‘cause we have a fuck ton of money, we have like a over one billion dollar endowment, we're one of the richest colleges in the nation for a school of 1600 in central Iowa. We should be able to do a lot. But the reality is, very few people wanna live there, especially psychiatrists who can get money and move somewhere they want to live because there's a national shortage. So, I don't think the solution is necessarily in getting better institutional support, I definitely commend my friends who are fighting for that, but I'm more about, how do we get our students trained? Plus, like, most students would rather talk to students anyway, more so than a therapist, so, how do we give each other the tools to do it since we're already doing it. But I think that must have just lost. That's part of the liberalism of like, umm, liberal politics of college students being like, “the institution should be taking care of us better, we need to fight and push the institution to do this...” yata yata yata, like yes, they should be doing more, but also, there are more victories to be had.

**Vaccaro:** Now, imagining a lot of what you encountered this summer in talking to folks, especially your elders, is kind of a sense of, networks of survival, resilience, and work outside of a system. A system that can insufficient. And wondering how you'll take those lessons back with you, to the classroom, to your communities there and beyond and if there's any other kind of final thoughts that you might have that you want to make sure you share with us on the record.

**Tennenbaum:** Yeah, um it's true. What I'll take back is something that I started moving more towards when I was in Amsterdam where there were very very...okay I guess there weren't very few trans and non conforming people but okay there were few but I'm also used to that in Iowa. Um, it's something about being in a bigger city and still having a very small cohort pushed me towards, really just like, emphasizing care for trans people. Especially when I saw legibly trans femmes, like I might make sure that I'm like on the same block as them. Just in case something happens, that there would be some kind of like team there. And I think talking with elders and learning how these tight community formations and closeness; even though there seems to always be like some levels of bickering within trans groups, it's still so important to stay close and stay connected even if politics clash, even if desires clash. Cause it's survival, it's safety, it's group knowledge, that's how you learn about good support care and resources that are available, and I think pulling those resources is so important so, I'll be going back to Iowa with more focused on that. Even like, in my walking around my own streets again, if I see especially like black trans woman who are legible as trans, I hope I'm not creepy but sometimes if, like they, diverge but it's still somewhat on the way of where I'm headed, I'll walk near them and be ready to kind of like, fight, especially if like, cops are around. I feel like I have to leverage my whiteness. I think that's all. Thank you.

**Vaccaro:** Thank you for talking to us, Ric, we really appreciate it.

**Tennenbaum:** It's been, an amazing time.