NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

AMAREE JAEL

Interviewer: Elliot Maya

Date of Interview: August 15th, 2016

Location of Interview: Alex Salerno’s Home

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Transcribed by Patrick Ossmann (volunteer)

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Elliot Maya: Hello, my name is Elliot Maya and I will be having a conversation with Amaree for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is August 15th, and this is being recorded at Alex Salerno's home. Amaree, can you introduce yourself?

Amaree Jael: Uh, my name is Amaree, umm, 19, trans male from the Bronx.

Maya: So Amaree, in general, um, how do you identify? What pronouns do you use?

Jael: Um, I identify as bigender. Male and aporagender, which means that, basically, you have a gender but it's non-specified. Umm, I was born here, born and raised here. I use He or They pronouns.

Maya: Wonderful. So you were born here, in New York City.

Jael: Mmm hmm.

Maya: In the Bronx.

Jael: In Manhattan.

Maya: In Manhattan. Whereabouts in Manhattan were you born?

Jael: Uhh, I was born and raised on, um, 125th, near, between Lenox and 5th. Yeah.

Maya: How long did you live there?

Jael: Uhh, until I was about 16.

Maya: Okay, where do you live now?

Jael: I live in the Bronx.

Maya: Cool. So, growing up on 125th, can you tell me a little bit about what the neighborhood was like, and what was it like with your family living there, etc.?

Jael: Umm, it wasn't good, but it wasn't terrible. Umm, definitely, probably, a bit of gang activity. It was about a step up from the projects. Before it starting being gentrified, it was, you know, very dudes on the corner, sitting outside the stoop, uh, smoking weed outside, yeah.

Maya: How would you describe your race or ethnicity?

Jael: Uh, black.
Maya: Black. Black American or just Black?

Jael: Black.

Maya: Black. [laughter] So, talk about your, the block that you grew up on and how you, you called it, like a step up from the projects, right?

Jael: Yeah.

Maya: What is one of your earliest memories from growing up on the block?

Jael: Umm, pshhhh. I guess, probably the first time I realized that the area that I lived on wasn't so good was the first time a guy got shot outside of my apartment. Umm, I was home alone, and, you know, doing my schoolwork and all of a sudden I hear this "Bang!" and I'm like, what in the world is this? So I look outside my window and there is some dude laying, literally, on the floor, on the ground in front of my apartment, just dead. And, all of a sudden everyone starts crying and I was just like "Where the hell do I live?" Like, I thought I knew but I guess I don't. Yeah, so.

Maya: Yeah, that, how old were you?

Jael: Uhh, maybe about twelve, thirteen or twelve.

Maya: Thirteen. And do you remember anything else about that incident? That you were outside? Did you join the crowd?

Jael: Umm, I just remember watching from my window, umm, I was just really scared of the cops and I didn't want them asking questions, and I remember I called my biological mother and told her that somebody got shot and she was like, "If the police knock, don't answer the door, wait til I come home." And I was like, "Why?" And she was like, "Just don't answer the door." And, sure enough, after she got home, two white police officers came up to our door and I was scared as hell. I was like, I don't know what's going to happen. I was like, are they gonna shoot us, like, it was, a wreck.

Maya: So the threat of the police, in a sense, eclipsed the threat, or the perceived threat, of the very mortal fear of seeing a dead body, like on your stoop, essentially.

Jael: Yeah. I mean, I'm into like a lot of weird stuff, so like, seeing a dead body was more of like a cooler experience, but I think that was the first time that I'd ever really felt, scared, was when the cops came and knocked on the door.

Maya: Do you remember, how young were you when you first, kinda realized, that the cops were something that, or were a force that you were afraid of?
Jael: Probably around that time. I always knew that they made me uncomfortable. You know, they always looked at me some kind of way and, you know, I'm, I'm the type of person where, you know, I tend to stare, just because that's my way of, like, seeing things. And the cops would always just stare me down and always made me extremely uncomfortable and I never knew why. And it was usually the white cops, the white male cops who always felt the need to have a stare-down with me and I never understood why, you know? It was just like, uncomfortable.

Maya: Mmm hmm. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Well, the next question is... I, I want, I do want to go back to that, that idea. It's a very like, strong opening memory to have of like, your block. I think we should definitely dissect that if you're comfortable. But I was wondering if I could hear more about your house, like what did your house look like?

Jael: My house was tiny. Um, we lived in a little four-floor apartment complex. It's very small. It was pretty much, about, not many square footage. It was two-bedrooms. Up until I was about ten or so I shared a bedroom with my half-brother and then after that my biological mother gave him his own room and forced me to sleep with her until I turned about, 14? And then, I think around that age, yeah, and then she gave me his room and he went wherever.

Maya: So, you said you didn't enjoy living there.

Jael: No.

Maya: Did you have, like a good relationship with your siblings and your biological mother?

Jael: Absolutely not. Oh man no.

Maya: No?

Jael: I mean, she, cause she wasn't equipped, necessarily, to be a fit mother, and you know she had a lot of issues going on at the time, that, you know, me being older now, my Dad has explained somewhat to me. But she just wasn't equipped to handle, trying to raise kids. And it's not necessarily her fault but she just wasn't. Not every, not every parent deserves children, but every child deserves a parent, and I was just one of the kids who just so happened to have a parent who didn't really realize the impact that they had on them. Um, and my half-brother, he and I were, you know, friendly up until about I turned, 9 or so. After that, I just knew he really irritated me, for whatever reason.

Maya: Did he do certain things?

Jael: He just didn't seem to care about my well-being. He would bring around friends who, you know, looked at me kinda suspiciously, and never really said anything about it. I remember one time I was walking up the steps, I think I was about twelve maybe, and one of his friends was like "Yo your" you know at the time, "Your little sister is cute."
Maya: Mmm hmm.

Jael: And it made me really uncomfortable and he just really didn't say anything about it and I was like, I see how you see me now, okay great, like I'm just some sort of person taking up space, you know, so.

Maya: Is that how your house felt sometimes? Did you feel like, this is a place where you're taking up space, but did you really live there?

Jael: Oh, I just kinda felt like I was a person who was literally taking up space, like I was just a burden to everyone, like I'm just here, can you hurry up and get the hell out, you know?

Maya: Did you have ways of combatting that feeling? Like, did you do things that you like to do? Did you leave the house? Did you explore the neighborhood?

Jael: Umm, well I was a pretty chill kid, I really didn't do much because I didn't really get along with the kids on my block. And I think it was because I realized from a young age I was a lot more intellectual than the kids I went to school with, and I didn't really mesh with a lot of people because I had such different interests. Like, I went to, I didn't start going to PWIs until I hit, like, middle school and high school.

Maya: What's PWI?

Jael: Primarily White Institutions.

Maya: Okay.

Jael: Umm, but my elementary school was a lot of black and latinx kids and I didn't really fit in. Like they always told me, you act too white or you speak too white or, things like that. And I tried to, like, sort of blend in but it just didn't really work cause I loved to read, and I didn't really like to go outside during recess. I liked to stay inside and read books in the AC.

Maya: Mmm hmm. [laughter]

Jael: And, you know, things like that. I liked doing extra work and, you know, whenever we would have reading tests I was always like, ways ahead of the other kids, and you know, my teachers would ask me to tutor other kids. I never said yes cause I knew the kids didn't like me, and I figured out later on that it was, you know, just because I was a little different.

Maya: Mmm hmm.

Jael: And, you know, kids can be cruel, so.

Maya: So, when you, I want to talk about how you felt about institutions. Maybe we can start with the, umm, you started at PWIs, right?
Jael: I started a PWI in about the 6th great.

Maya: Okay, but before that were you at a primarily black school?

Jael: Yeah.

Maya: So what was that like? Elementary school? What were your experiences there?

Jael: Uh, I got bullied a lot.

Maya: Okay.

Jael: It was really, a lot of the same commentary, you act too white, you... There were literally two white kids in the class.

Maya: Okay.

Jael: Two white girls and I was friends with the both of them. And, we liked to read books and we'd just, you know, chill out and talk, and I didn't really think there was anything wrong with that, I just saw them as my friends. I wasn't really like, these are my white friends, but everyone around me made the distinction and I wasn't really sure why, until I got older and I realized that there is a distinction. Not that there's anything wrong with it, but there is a distinction, like I'm not like them. They're not like me. And like...

Maya: They as in your white friends.

Jael: Yeah. And, growing up, my biological mother had very mixed messages about race. She was like, she wanted to send me to PWIs because they had better opportunities, and she wasn't really trying to educate me about my blackness, but at the same time she would tell me "You're black and you need to know that because these people are not gonna treat you like everyone else." So I was just very, I wasn't really sure what she was trying to get across to me. All I just knew was that I, inherently, wasn't as good as everyone else, and I had to try and sort of, like, get around that. And I remember she told me, and this will stick with me for forever, she told me that, "You have to be twice as good to be half as good." And I didn't really know what that meant until I started going to PWIs and I was, like, yeah I see what she was saying. [laughter] Like, I'm so different from all these other kids, but she would always send me there because they had better resources, and things like that. Because she knew that like, sort of the quote un-quote "inner city schools" didn't have a lot of opportunities for growth because they didn't really put a lot of money into those schools because there were so many minorities. You know, and it's like, inherently, you know, being a minority means you don't get the same resources as everyone else because you just, you don't need them. Cause you're just gonna turn out to be a drug dealer or a gang member anyway.
Maya: When did you first become racially conscious? Like, not even conscious, that the wrong word, but aware that you were black? You are black and there are people that are not.

Jael: In the sixth grade. When I first started going to my middle school, um, there was a girl who, like bullied me relentlessly for 2, 3 years. And I remember she was making fun of the way I spoke. And, I wasn't sure why. I was like, I go to this school same as you, like, it didn't make any sense to me and I remember one day, you know, she call me "ghetto" and I was like, I'm not, like, what? And it, it confused me because in, what my biological mother had taught me was, you know, ghetto was the loud talking black kids, the black kids who cursed too much. You know, the black kids who were running around doing whatever at all types of night. So I was confused, and that's kinda when I realized that, no matter how you speak or, you know, what you look like, lots of times white people are just going to see you as less than, just because of your skin.

Maya: Mmm hmm. And you said that your mother, you biological mother, didn't, gave you mixed messages so your idea of, like you knew that, in white environments, there was this idea, like of you not measuring up, enough. But then in black environments there is still this level of, well, as you said you still got bullied, and there's a level of like, a difference still existed and that, you knew the difference was, like eventually in white environments, that like they considered you to be something that wasn't white. But then in black environments, where, like in elementary school, and I think, beyond, where you were, encountered bullying. How did you wrap your mind around that? How did you understand, why am I still being bullied?

Jael: I, I didn't know how to, because it was like, I just knew I didn't fit in anywhere, because it was like I was too white for the black kids and too black for the white kids, so where the hell do I fit in? Because, it's like, I'm black but I'm not like, that kinda black, whatever that kinda black was. It was like, my, my mother made these distinctions, like you're not like, these black kids. But the white kids made the distinction of, you're not like the white kids.

Maya: Yeah.

Jael: So, I was just, I was like, I was confused. And I was like, I sort of had like, a race crisis almost because I was like, well, maybe I'm mixed, maybe, like there has to be something else in there because there's no way in the world I could just not fit in anywhere. And I remember in the sixth grade we did, sort of like a family tree thing, and I find out I am nothing but black going back to my great, great, great, great Grandfather, who actually was white and he was a slave-owner. And, so, apparently I believe, the family story is that he raped one of his slaves and the rest of us came from that. And I was like, well I'm just black, there's nothing else in there so what is the problem. And for a while I was just kinda confused because I just didn't understand why I didn't fit in anywhere but I realized it's because, you know, sort of like, the sort of like the inherent self-hate that goes on in the black community. Like, just because I sound like I read books doesn't make me white, because black people read too, and we do everything that they do. The only difference is the skin color. And I feel like, these, being in sort of like the inner city schools they didn't, they sort of capitalized on the self-hate, by sort
of separating lots of the poorer minorities via bad schools, no resources, thing like that, so this sort of reinforces the idea of, we're not good enough. And so you have kids dropping out of schools because the teachers don't know how to teach and they don't want to teach, you know? It's like, where did you find teachers who are dedicated to wanting to better the lives of the kids that go to inner city schools. And, like, looking back on it I was like that's a lot of self-hate that I experienced and, luckily, for me, I managed to sort of, not internalize so much of it. Because I still had a lot of issues growing up, I was like well I guess I'm supposed to be with the white kids but the white kids didn't get me so I was like, well everyone tells me I act so white and like, I have a certain kind of music, and you know, I do a lot of things that black people just don't do. And I sort of had to debunk those things for myself and realize that I'm okay in my blackness, no matter what type of music I listen to, no matter what I wear, no matter who I'm interested in, things like that.

Maya: So, you talk about, um, the idea of self-hate and how, I agree with you, I think it's incredibly prevalent in black and brown communities especially a lot of black communities, and in the children. In your growing up have you identified as something not black enough or, even if you, the day you realized you were black, you had a moment where you're like, "but do I want to be that [inaudible] and I get to choose because that comes with a lot of baggage, and so my curiosity is, when you realized that, "yeah I'm black" [inaudible] just love black, and there are the people making value judgments on you in every which way based on how they decide to perceive your blackness for that day. Do you remember how young you understood and dealt with the manifestation of self-hate, of like anti-blackness in your body, like how did that manifest for you?

Jael: Umm, I definitely tried to fit in with the black kids, and I say black kids... Before I started going to PWIs I definitely tried to fit in with them. I started trying to use the slang, I started trying to, you know and I, I, it was crazy because you know, and they look at me like, "you're just trying too hard" and I'm like, but this is how you want me to be. This is the only way I'm gonna fit in with you guys, and so I remember when I came home one day and I guess I was using a little too much slang, my mother asked, she was like, "What's wrong with you? We don't, we don't speak like that." And in my head I was like, who is "We?" Because this is how they want me to be, this is how the black kids in my school want me to be, I have no choice but to be like this, because it's the only way I'm going to be accepted in my blackness. And she was like, "You're gonna speak like you've read a book." And that was like, the only time she didn't equate me being black with like, how what people saw me. She just said, "Act like you've read a book." And I was like, huh, okay, so that's what I've been doing. I've been acting like I have some sense in my head, somewhat, and not acting like I'm white. And that was like a revelation for me because that was the first time anybody had said anything to me that didn't equate to some sort of animosity between races. It was just, act like you've read a book. Sound like you read the dictionary for fun. [laughter]

Maya: So it was a big moment for you?
Jael: Yeah it was, like I, cause for once it helped me feel like I'm not a failure to the black race, I just, some people don't read books and I like to read books. And that doesn't make me white, it just means I like to read books.

Maya: So, do you remember any conversations that you, you've hinted at some [inaudible] relationship with your biological mother, and if you're comfortable I'd like to talk about that. If you don't want to, let me know. And so, can you tell me more about those dynamics or can you remember a specific conversation that you had with your biological mother that really left, like, a mark, that really impacted you for a long time. Positively or negatively.

Jael: Umm, well the relationship between, she was a very closed-off person. She did a lot of things on the low that she didn't think I knew about but I was an observant kid. I recognized that something was a little off because, you know, kids would talk about, you know, "My mom did this for me" or "my mom did that for me" and I never really had that. My mother, she didn't go on school trips. I had to, like, beg her to come to one I remember. I had to beg her. I was like "Please please please please." She was like, "I have to work, you know I can't do this." I'm like, "Please Mom, please just come to the school trip and I will never ask you again." And she was like, "You know what, fine, I'll go." So, you know, she took me to school, and of course every kid is like, oh my gosh. We were hanging out with my friends and I just thought, I was like, don't embarrass me. Because, you know, she liked to call me all sorts of names in the house and that's fine in the house and I was like, "Mom, please just don't embarrass me" like that's it. And she's like "Alright, alright I'm not gonna embarrass you." And I'm like alright, great. So, you know, I went to school and she came with me and it was a weird experience because I hadn't been around her for that long, in like a setting, in general. I was with her for the whole day. [yawn] Excuse me. But, like, I didn't want her around me, I just wanted her doing the things that parents do. But, it didn't feel like us. It felt fake, you know. Like, you know, I thought I would be excited, but in essence I just wanted her doing the things that other parents do. And she wasn't doing that. And that's kinda like when I realized that okay, she's not like the other moms and she, that's just not her, she's not gonna be that so I'm gonna stop forcing her to. Because that's what it felt essentially, like I was forcing her to be something that she wasn't. She was the type of mom that, you know, cooked dinner and before dinner she was in her room with the door locked. After dinner she was in her room with the door locked. The only time we really spent any time together was when we were eating, and even then we were watching T.V. so there's not really and sort of communication happening. So, I mean, that was basically the dynamic of our relationship. I was basically on my own and I kinda had to fend for myself because, any time, for instance you know, kids ask their parents for help with their homework all the time and her answer was, well "Why don't you know this. That's what you're in school for." And I was like, well, just gonna struggle through this on my own, that's fine. And, but you know, then I started trying to call my dad to ask for help, because they were divorced by this time, and he helped me. And so, you know, she realized this and so any time I needed help, "Mom I need help with my homework." "Call your father." Great, so that sort of strengthened my father and I's relationship and sort of began to diminish the already, sort of, wrecked dynamic between my biological mother and I.

Maya: What did your mother do, if I can ask?
Jael: What didn't she do? [laughter] I swear the only thing she didn't do was hit me. And I kinda wish, sometimes I wish that it had been that rather than, sort of, the, sort of leftover psychological effects of borderline verbal abuse. She wasn't the fun parent, she was the very strict, you know, and again, you know there are parents like that and my friend, um, had a dad like that. He was, you know, all about making sure his kids knew what they were doing and things like that, but um, he was present in their life. And my mother, even when she was at home she wasn't there for me. And so, you know, that coupled with a lot of, because I had weight problems when I was younger, and so that coupled with a lot of "Why don't you do this?" "Why are you so fat?" "Why can't you get your grades up?" "Why can't you do this?" "Why can't you do that?" It was just a lot of that. And, it messed me up because I was like well, it sort of made me feel like I was a burden to her and she didn't love me and things like that. And, my best friend, who was like, sort of the ideal...[yawn] Excuse me, sort of the ideal daughter, placed up against me. And from a very young age I always knew that I wasn't straight, or sort of cis, I knew I identified more with the boys than the girls. I knew I liked girls but I wasn't sure what it was because there was no exploration of that in my house, I just knew I was different. So, you know, so, sort of being put up, and somewhat pitted against my best friend, was like psychologically hurtful to me. And I didn't realize it until later on down the line. Um, you know, it was a lot of "Aren't you all in the same class, why can't you get help? Why can't you have her help you?" And I'm like, "Because she doesn't know what she's doing either. Like, the only person helping her is her father." So she was like, "Well I'm going to send you over there for tutoring because you obviously don't know what you're doing. Why don't you ask for help?" And I'm like, "Because she can't help me." I'm doing physics in the ninth grade, I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Like, what? No one knew what they were doing. I mean, excuse me, physics in the sixth grade. Um, no I lied, the ninth grade. That was right. Umm, so it's like, it was like, tumultuous but all internally I learned to just keep things to myself. Because that's what she did, she always acted like everything was okay and when people would ask her, oh how's so and so? "Oh you know, everyone's great, everyone's fine." But it wasn't, and so from that I sort of internalized the whole lying to people and telling them that everything is fine when it's not. And then you deal with your own problems at home. You know, behind closed doors, you do whatever you have to to function. And she was a functioning alcoholic and so, she, she thought I didn't know but I knew. She would drink, and, you know, she would smoke cigarettes in her room and every time she would come out and just febreeze. And when I was younger I was like, what the heck is she doing, she just wanted to smell nice and I was like okay maybe I'll start febreezing my room, like, you know. But then I got older and I remember one time I caught her smoking in the, in the, bathroom, and you know, I would go in there sometimes and I'm like "Mom is smells like cigarette smoke in here," and she's like "Oh that's just, you know, the people downstairs." And I'm like "Okay." Until one day she was on the phone and I knocked on the door and sure enough she opened the phone, she opened the door with a phone on her shoulder and a cigarette in one hand and she was like "What do you want?" And I was like, "I just wanted to show you this thing that I made." And she was like, "I'll look at it later. K, bye." I was like, alrighty then, that's...mkay. I see how this is, and I was like so that's what you've been doing all this time. So that's kinda when I realized that I was more alone than I actually thought I was, because I didn't really
have anybody except my father who I saw on weekends. So like, two and a half days a week, out of seven, I saw him.

**Maya:** So this sense of aloneness, it seems that home life and possibly school life, fostered, how did you come to understand, or accept and recognize that you weren’t straight and that you weren’t cis?

**Jael:** Well, I mean, most definitely I was very proud of myself when it came to that. I was very open about it. You know I remember my first crush on my second grade teacher. Like I always knew and I remember there was this girl, um, and I was never ashamed of it, but I remember the first time I ever felt ashamed of being, you know, quote unquote different was, one time, when um, this girl who I thought was my friend at the time. Her name was Kea. Umm, I told her, I was like "Kea I have something to tell you." And she was like "Yeah what's up?" And I was like, "I like girls." And she was like, "What? Eew oh my god that's so gross." And I was like, "It's not, like, no it's just like, I just like girls, the way boys like girls, like you know. Not anything wrong with that." And she's like "Okay." So I though everything was good. She told everyone in the class. And that was the first time I had ever felt ashamed about who I was. Because when she told everybody in the class, everyone started making fun of me, the girls didn't want to talk to me, or anything like that because "Oh, you like me." And I was like, "Honestly, like, my type is pretty, so you have nothing to worry about." [laughter] Like, so I just, I sort of had to develop this thicker skin about me being who I was because I sort of had no one else to teach me how to do that. I just had to sort of do it for myself so it was like, trial and error, you know, just figure out what works and what doesn't.

**Maya:** Do you think that, with this having happened, that that's affected your idea of, of what community can mean and look like? As an adult?

**Jael:** Oh yeah! Yeah definitely. I mean, I feel like, for me, my want in community is sort of unconditional love, no matter what, like no matter what I tell you you'll still love me, whether or not you agree, you'll still love me and respect me. And I can talk to you about these things, whatever they may be. So you know, if it's, if I'm having girlfriend troubles or boyfriend troubles or significant other troubles and you might not agree but you'll sit there and you'll listen to me. And you'll love me regardless. You know, and that's, that's sort of what community feels like to me and I never really had that until I got older. And, you know, even now, like I'm just recently finding people who accept me for who I am. Because like, you know, in a sense I, you know I always felt like everyone has conditions, until I sort of met the group of people that I hang out with now and they're like, there's no conditions. Like, you know, they seem to be like, you know, always gonna be here for me, no matter what. And it's a refreshing feeling but it was also extremely strange and sort of foreign. People are, you know my friends are always like, "Yeah I'm always gonna be here for you." And I'm just like "Lol Jk. You wild, what you doing though." Like, you know, cause I, I, just no one ever said that to me. You know, I'd never heard those words before. So any person, you know, who kinda said that to me I really didn't believe. So, you know, it was. The sense of community that I feel now was definitely something that, um, that I'm used to but I embrace wholeheartedly because it's nice to have people who love you.
Maya: Mmm hmm.

Jael: You know.

Maya: What are some positive experiences you've had, related to this idea of community?

Jael: Umm, definitely the friends that met now, like, it's, it's nice to have people to hang out with, you know, and like people who are supportive of me. For instance, like, umm, Natt.

Maya: Natt who?

Jael: Natt Cabrera, a friend of mine. Um, he, he wants to, he sort of like embarking on this mission to be come, sort of trans famous. And, you know, I remember, he took photos of me and, for his trans instagram blog and I was like, wow, like, this is what it feels like to have people who, who embrace who you are. You know, and it's like, you know a lot of people can say, "That's cool, you're trans" but there's not really a lot of embracing that part, and so that was the first time I really felt like parts of my identity were being accepted, like fully accepted by people who are just like me. And it was a very validating experience, because, you know, like, and I do a lot of that for myself in terms of being very open about my transness and my queerness, but it's nice when other people can affirm that for you. And that's what I hadn't experienced until recently.

Maya: Do you think that part of the community is playing the role of, of like an affirmative energy?

Jael: Absolutely, I mean, it's sort of like, we become sort of, like other people become the things that you need. For instance, I never had a mother figure and I got that from other people. You know, people who actually cared about my health and well-being. And I wasn't used to that, I was just like, yeah okay you're just being naggy, stop. But in reality, it was people caring about me and I never really had that and I feel like that's what friendship and relationships in general are about, are people who help you look out for yourself. You know, and that was something I hadn't experienced so it was like a foreign concept to me, but that's my idea of community, are people who help you help yourself and, and are there for you when you need them. And so if you, if you tell someone, it's like yeah man, I need some validation right now, that person has you. You are the greatest person in the world, even if you don't think that. You are so poppin', you have a great sense of style, you have great this, great that, I'm so glad that you're my friend. Those are the type of people that you need in your life, and that's what community is about, are people who will help you even if you can't help yourself. You know?

Maya: I like that. What are some negative experiences you've had related to community, if there are any?
**Jael:** Depending too much on people. Definitely that becomes a large problem for me, um, mostly, mostly because of the various mental illnesses that I have. Um, I can sort of rely a little to heavy on validation from people and, as great as that is, that can't just be all that. Umm, what's the word I'm looking for? Like, that can't be all I depend on and sometimes it can be that, where if a person, if a person, you know, that I know is upset with me it's the end of the world. Because all of that previous validation is now gone because this person is upset with me, when in actuality people are allowed to be upset and people have feeling and just because that person is upset doesn't mean that they don't love you. You know, and so, [cough] like I have a lot of issues with that and, you know, I'm still trying to work through those things with therapy and things like that. Umm, but those tend to be some of the negative things, like when you have people speaking so fondly of you all the time, when it seems like they're not doing that any more it's kinda like a shock to my system.

**Maya:** Can you describe the community or communities you are a part of now?

**Jael:** Black Tumblr community, the trans community, transmasculine community, queer community, LGBTQ community in general, um.

**Maya:** In general, in the whole world?

**Jael:** Yep everybody.

**Maya:** Like the Callen-Lorde or?

**Jael:** Um, Callen-Lorde, yeah Callen-Lorde has sort of created our own sort of community, um outside of that. Like we, uh, a bunch of my friends we have this group chat going on, and so that's sort of our little community, and so the more people we add to that the bigger our community gets. Umm, so, you know, but also, I guess separately the transmasculine community at the Callen-Lorde Center would also be, you know, somewhat different because we talk about different things. And, you know, some people are there sometimes, some people are there other times, so, I see those as somewhat vaguely different. Um, yeah.

**Maya:** So, sorry this is a little less than an organic shift, I'm just kinda moving around and seeing what sparked the conversation. So, in our glorious year of 2016 and I'm gonna say the last five years we've seen a marked increase in not just LGBT, or LGBTQ visibility, but like specifically we've seen a large upshoot in trans visibility, although specifically a lot of that is MTF. So, my question is, how do you see yourself in this, like, epic of increased queerness and increased trans visibility?

**Jael:** Well, for me it's more of supporting other people to help them get to the state where I'm at where I'm, I guess, like, overly comfortable with myself, in the sense of like, I'll tell a random person on the street like, "Yeah I'm trans how are you?" Like, what does that have to do with anything? Absolutely nothing but I'm proud of myself and who I am so I'm just gonna let you know that. And so I feel like for me, sort of, my role in a sense is to help other people get comfortable with themselves like that, because not a lot of people are. And you know, it's
one thing to have people who validate and affirm, affirm you know, you and give you self-confidence but it's another thing to have people literally help you embrace who you are for yourself. And I feel like that's sort of, like, my role in this and like, it's been making me so happy to see that trans visibility that has sort of increase, especially on Tumblr because I'm very much a Tumblr person. I don't really do a lot of social media just because I feel like a lot of it can be somewhat fake in a sense of like, people will reblog or repost things on Facebook but they don't really care about the issues. Um, but yeah I, like the um, the visibility itself makes me happy, although, and there are always going to be issues with things, there's really not a lot of, for instance, transfeminine visibility, unless it's, this trans woman got killed today, or this trans woman got kidnapped. And it's like, we need more positive things, meanwhile, and at the same time also that goes for the FtM community as well, because, lots of times all you'll really see are these really buff guys, who you can't really tell, you know, quote unquote can't really tell, and not everyone is like that. And that's also something I had to learn for myself, that literally not everybody want to be buff and ripped and get top surgery and, and sort of put on this sort of facade being a cis male. And that was something that I, I assumed that everyone wanted to be like that and I assumed that somehow being on testosterone and doing all these things were gonna do that for you but they don't, that's something you have to work at for yourself. And being in this community has sort of helped me also sort of debunk the, the things that I've been conditioned to think. You know that, like, now I know, it's like, it's okay for men to cry, any sort of men at all. And that, you know, not every trans person wants to transition, and you know, not every trans man wants to be super buff and masculine. Some of them want to wear dresses and that's totally okay. You know, it's like, there are so many ways to be trans. And that's something not a lot of people speak on. They just sort of pocket it as this one breed of the trans man or this one breed of this super feminine dress-wearing trans woman.

**Maya:** Do you feel like, we have, like a very limited number of trans individuals in spots of mostly positive visibility, like I want say, I forget her last name, but Carmen...

**Jael:** Carrera.

**Maya:** Carrera, um, Laverne Cox, um, I actually don't even know many, like famous-famous trans men, besides the athlete in the Olympics right now, on the men's team, I think the US men's team. And, my curiosity is, in the way that like black Tumblr and black social spaces are beginning to ask more of black celebrities saying it's not enough for you to pocket off of our money and then walk away when we're dying, and then like make an album about something and vaguely referencing that community [inaudible] speak while we're still here. Do you hold some accountability to trans celebrities or just people with more of a voice or do you see that as more of, it's already much more contentious to be a trans body in a public space and like, for safety reasons do you see a lot of their silences as, like permissible?

**Jael:** I feel like that's such a complicated question, because I completely understand the silence of some trans people in terms of a safety issue. Because lots of times there are spaces that people are in where they're not capable of being out, and they're not capable of being themselves and that I understand. You know, so it's like, not every trans person is able to
reblog that post on, you know, so and so, or be out and be sort of advocates for themselves and other people. Um, but at the same time I feel like, if you are in a position to be able to do that, why not do that, why not rep your people? You know, why not speak on these issues if you have the power to and if you are capable of doing so. Like, for instance Laverne Cox is a great example of someone who is in, you know, the celebrity spotlight and does so much, trying to speak and trying to be this trans activist, that it's so refreshing to see people like that. Or for instance, like Janet Mock is very much a trans activist and we need more people like that but at the same time, that sort of representation is not really there for trans men, because a lot of trans men choose to fly under the radar and just live their lives. And not to say there is anything wrong with that, but we need more men like us trying to help men like us. And I feel like you have these trans women speaking on, they can only do so much to speak on trans male issues, because it's not the lives that they lead. So they can only do so much and I feel like, just like you have women like Laverne Cox and Carmen Carrera and Janet Mock speaking on transfeminine things we need more trans men speaking on these issues but, they sort of, I'm not gonna say choose, the easier life quote unquote, but it's just a question of where are my people at. Where's our representation? And you know, I'm a huge advocate for the transfeminine community because it's so problematic, you know lots of times the way people in general, including trans people, treat trans women, but sometimes it's like, where's our representation? You know, just like black people want to be represented, just like, just like, um, latinx people want to be represented, transmen want to be represented too. And I feel like that representation really isn't that thorough or that pronounced.