INTerview TRANSCRIPT

ZEPHYR DANIEL MERKUR HERRERA

Interviewer: Lorenzo Van Ness

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Transcribed by Robert Schofield (volunteer)

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Lorenzo Van Ness: Hello, my name is Lorenzo Van Ness, and I will be having a conversation with Zephyr Daniel Merkur Herrera 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. Today's the 17th of March and this is being recorded at Little Skips.

Zephyr Daniel Merkur Herrera: Yeah.

Van Ness: Great. So why don't we start? Why don't you say your name and your pronouns and stuff?

Merkur: I'm Zephyr, my pronouns are they/them.

Van Ness: How old are you?

Merkur: I'm 22 years old.

Van Ness: Okay, cool. Where were you born, and when, and all that good stuff?

Merkur: I was born in Queens, Long Island Jewish, [in] 1995... 9/11 actually.

Van Ness: Oh, wow.

Merkur: That's impacted my life in many ways. I moved to Argentina when I was about 2. Spanish is actually my first language, and then when the economy collapsed in Argentina — as the music gets louder —


Merkur: [laughs] At least the — I like this band.

Van Ness: It's great.

Merkur: Yeah.

Van Ness: It's your background music.

Merkur: It works.

Van Ness: [Laughs]

Merkur: I was in Buenos Aires for three years. When the economy collapsed in Argentina I moved to California, and I spent most of my life there until moving back to New York for college.
**Van Ness:** When you were in Argentina, or when you were here too also, were you with your parents, did you live with your grandparents?

**Merkur:** Yeah, I lived with my parents. They split up when I was about ten, and divorced officially at 15.

**Van Ness:** Did you have any siblings?

**Merkur:** No, just some cats.

**Van Ness:** Okay. How many cats?

**Merkur:** My first cat was named Hercules. I got him when I was five. My second one was Zesty. We had him for about a year before he died because he was sick. And then I had Dewey for about 10 years, and he got run over by a car, which — I know that sounds like such a mood switch, but he died the way we met him, basically, where he escaped the ASPCA. So he died the way he lived: outside, but I feel like it’s the way he wanted to go...

**Van Ness:** Alright...

**Merkur:** And I currently have Reeka, who’s four years old.

**Van Ness:** What was it like growing up in Argentina?

**Merkur:** I really liked it. I was such a little tom boy. I was on the tee-ball team. My dad coached, I was the only girl at the time, and... yeah. I just had a lot of fun. My parents wanted me to learn English, because I was really stubborn about it, about not speaking English, so they found some American families in the area who happened to be Texans, which led to this little New Yorker having this Texan accent in Buenos Aires.

**Van Ness:** [Inaudible]

**Merkur:** Yeah, it was kind of weird. And every once in a while there’s the slightest twinge, but not that much.

**Van Ness:** That’s cool...

**Merkur:** I was always really into sports. I signed up for soccer in California - or, my parents signed me up. I started doing that when I was six. I was doing jiu jitsu during the winter, because it’s not as cold as New York, but it’s enough that you don’t want to be out playing soccer. So I did jiu jitsu for a long time as a kid, I did soccer, I ended up... my family’s very sporty. Both my parents are runner. They’ve done marathons. I did soccer throughout all of school. I went up until the JV team in high school when I broke my wrist, and I was a goalie, so that kind of got in the way. So yeah, did a lot of sporty stuff, was also real into music. I’m a classically-trained
percussionist, which is kind of fun. I did timpani in my wind ensemble, then auxiliary all the other years, [when] I was the only “girl” — quotation marks — for these situations. Yeah.

**Van Ness:** That's funny. Wow... so you did a lot of...

**Merkur:** Extracurricular...

**Van Ness:** Yeah, extracurricular. What about in school? Did you...

**Merkur:** In school! I would be there sunup to sundown, and it would be dark when I went to school and went home.

**Van Ness:** By your choice? Or...

**Merkur:** ‘Cause of different activities I was doing. Especially — I would take A period classes so I could do more stuff. I worked really hard so I could have an easy senior year and it did pay off. Like I said, I did wind ensemble. I T.A.'d for my Spanish teacher, which ended up with me teaching Spanish class for a few weeks while she was injured.

**Van Ness:** Wow.

**Merkur:** Yeah, she's still in pain.

**Van Ness:** High school?

**Merkur:** Yeah! In high school I was leading the AP Spanish class ‘cause the substitute didn't speak any Spanish. And it was mostly work-work stuff, so it wasn't too hard. But yeah. I also did track and field for a while — again, ‘til I broke my wrist.

**Van Ness:** And that was in California.

**Merkur:** This was in California. I went to “California High School”. That's not a generic name, that's the name of the high school. It was hilarious. It's like “Where'd you go?” “I'm not kidding, this is the name.”

**Van Ness:** Yeah.

**Merkur:** I did shotput... I did a lot of sports until I broke my wrist, and that made me lose a lot of the fun. I was having a lot of eating disorder issues. I wasn't comfortable with how my body was forming, and the way I was putting on weight for sports... ‘cause with shotput you have to get really big legs. And my mom's Latina and my dad, even though he's Jewish, has a bubble butt, so I am just very heavy down here. So the fact that I was just making it bigger and bigger make me feel worse and worse, and I couldn't figure it out. Like I said, I was always a tomboy, but I didn't realize — I didn't come out as nonbinary until I was twenty-something.
Van Ness: Okay, yeah. That’s very recent.

Merkur: Yeah, but I was doing all the stuff. I wear the same clothes. The same clothes. I don’t... [laughs]

Van Ness: Yeah. It’s just the words.

Merkur: It’s just the words have changed, and I’ve done some medical steps now. I had top surgery almost a year ago now, I’m about 8 months on hormones. That’s been the biggest change transition-wise, but I was always, like, gender non-conforming, and I always called myself a tomboy. In elementary school I used to call myself half-boy/half-girl, which is like... it’s one of those things when you go back I’m like “Wow, I’m an idiot that I didn’t know I was trans sooner.” My friend said transgender for the first time, I remember vividly — I was 15, we were at the lunch table, and she was a lesbian. She was the first person out of my group of friends. Being queer went around like the cold. One person sneezed, another person came out as something. It’s just kind of how it went. And my friend said “Yeah, I can deal with homophobia, but I can’t deal with transphobia. I am so protective of my trans friends.” To which I said “I’d probably be a bisexual trans guy.” And I got pretty close with that guess, so even though I’ve been out only recently, I kinda was doing the thing for a while. Like I was obsessed with Against Me! for a long time and it all made more sense.

Van Ness: That’s cool. What was it like being gender non-conforming in Argentina, and then here, or California, or then coming to school in New York?

Merkur: It wasn’t a big deal when I was five. Like, sometimes as a baby I would yell at pink. Not like I saw the color pink and I would yell, but if my parents tried to dress me I would cry, if they put a bow on me it would only work until I would notice. There’s these cute photos of me in this little green dress and a little baseball hat. I’m just this little tomboy. Like, another one of me in overalls. I look like a little boy. And I remember in elementary school, people would ask me to show them my genitals to prove I was a girl ... Yeah! That was intense.

Van Ness: How did you respond to that?

Merkur: I think I just showed them I was wearing girls underwear. Like, it's enough! But yeah, I was like such a tomboy. I always had my hair tied up, and I always wanted to cut my hair short. But since I was six — yeah, six was the first time someone was like “You sound like a boy!” And I’m six. We didn't look very different back then. I just had longer hair. But that’s when the bullying for my gender started. Probably the most vivid memory I have of it now besides that first incident is sixth grade. We had a substitute for PE, and I was trying to go to the girl's locker room to get dressed for PE, and she wouldn't let me in...

Van Ness: Whoa.

Merkur: And someone else had to vouch for me.
Van Ness: Wow.

Merkur: So yeah.

Van Ness: Did your parents ever find out about that, or...?

Merkur: About that? I don’t know. I know that...

Van Ness: [Indecipherable]

Merkur: No, not from the teachers either, they wouldn’t have brought it up. But I always had issues with going to the bathroom, or just being in spaces because I looked kind of weird. After a while... like, when I was menstruating I learned I could just hold a tampon and no one would ask me a question, because men are too weak to hold tampons apparently?

Van Ness: Yeah, it's like kryptonite, actually.

Merkur: It's like kryptonite! You show men a tampon and they shrink. So for me that was just a sense of security. Just hold a tampon, like “I belong in here. Don’t...” [laughs]

Van Ness: It’s your bathroom pass.

Merkur: Basically! I needed a hall pass to go to the girl’s room. So I always dealt with people not thinking that... I tried really hard when I was 15 — a lot of stuff happened when I was 15, honestly. I broke my wrist, my parents divorced, that was my last year on the soccer team, my last year doing track, the year I discovered The Runaways as a band, which, like, moved me into punk rock, very directly. Before that I only listened to Ricky Martin and Adam Lambert, of course. [Laughs] But yeah, I tried really hard to — because I was on the girl’s JV team with soccer. They were all very feminine. They had long hair, they wore Uggs and skinny jeans, so I got skinny jeans. I tried to let my hair grow out a little bit, but I always was cutting it short about twice a year. Ponytail, cut it short again. I had the stereotypical phases of purging and doing that where I’d get the girls clothes and I’d be so uncomfortable. I always felt like I was in drag. There’s nothing wrong with drag. I was just very uncomfortable. I was trying to do makeup, like girls shirts that had that, like — unisex shirts are horizontal from the floor to the bicep. It was like the weird 45 degree angle ones. I always had big shoulders, too, so it hurt my armpits. And I tried it all and it was just terrible. And my mom was just like “Uh, [birth name], if you don’t start dressing more like a girl, you can’t keep getting mad at people for misgendering you.” Because back then they misgendered me as a boy. And I tried it, and then it’s like, Okay, I just can’t...

Van Ness: [Indecipherable]

Merkur: Actually it did upset me.

Van Ness: Oh, really? When they misgendered you...
Merkur: ...as a boy! Because I very strongly felt like “I am...” Then, I felt very much like I was a girl, I was just a different kind of girl, and that was okay. And it was very frustrating for me, 'cause I... very much, sort of girl power type thing. It's like “I can do anything as a girl, and no one can stop me, and I'm glad I'm like in all these masculine spaces as a girl” and like, being myself, and I also ID'd as straight, which, maybe that was part...

Third Person: It's vegan.

Merkur: Thanks. ... That's my partner.

Van Ness: Oh, okay, cool.

Merkur: So it would upset me! And after a while my mom was like “You either have to start dressing more like a girl, or stop being upset” and when dressing like a girl didn't work, I just had to stop being upset. And for me, I just had to get to a point where it's like “The people who matter know, and the people who don't know don't matter.” So, I just kind of went with that. For me, being misgendered by strangers, where now I'm more often misgendered as a guy, and I go more into guy's spaces ... I started passing really frequently at around six months, but I always kind of passed as male before. So, it's kind of... I am non-binary and I'm nonbinary all the time, even when people don't see it. It was very refreshing to be misgendered as a guy once I started T, cause before that I was starting to get misgendered as a girl almost all the time. So I lost that ambiguity. So it was fun, and now I'm being misgendered again, but I just have to remember people who matter know, people who don't know don't matter.

Van Ness: What was it like in terms of getting from that place of being like “I'm a different type of girl” to “I'm not a girl”?

Merkur: I sometimes still struggle with that, 'cause I do want to be an example of that, cause I didn't — as a kid, I never saw anyone who looked like me, especially being — like, my dad's Jewish, my mom's Latina, and Spanish is my first language. I had a Quinceañera, but people would regularly invalidate my hispanidad because I was pale. But at the same time because my dad's Jewish, I don't technically qualify as Jewish. So I've always been in this no man's land, where like most people... a lot of people think I'm German, 'cause I have kind of Germanic features. But that's... I'm very Jewish. So, it just kind of comes through in a weird way where I have high cheekbones, but, like, my father's face... like the rest of it. [laughs] I've looked like my father's twin since I was a kid. So, I was always like — what was the question? I got —

Van Ness: Oh, I dunno.

Merkur: I'm not — I went into —

Van Ness: Wherever you want to go! Go for it. I think I was asking about going from —
**Merkur:** Oh, yeah, from, yeah. ‘Cause — oh yeah, I never saw anyone who looked like me until I like saw Tegan and Sara. ‘Cause like we had a kind of similar haircut, they were like shorter, they had faces that were just kind of like mine. I'm just kind of like, “I look like them! This is the first time I've seen anyone who looked like me in media. And like, I know that there are other like, either little girls or future trans folks, who, just — you know what I mean by that.

**Van Ness:** Yeah.

**Merkur:** Like kids who don't have anyone to look up to, and I wanted to be that, so like, coming to terms with that I needed testosterone to alleviate my own dysphoria was like a struggle. And like, I'm non-binary. That's okay.

**Van Ness:** Yeah.

**Merkur:** Kinda like that kind of thing. So I've always been in this no man's land of, like, I always identify with an Other in a weird way. Like when I lived in California I identified as a New Yorker, and when I'm in New York I do ID as a New Yorker because I was born here, but I also acknowledge that I spent a lot of time in California. That affects, like, a lot of my knowledge and my slang, and like, the fact that I miss the sun. I miss the sun. [laughs] Yeah.

**Van Ness:** Um, what's your relationship like with your family?

**Merkur:** It's like mostly okay. It's a little rough sometimes. I think, like... moving away from them made it easier, because I had a little more control. It was difficult to be so close to my parents.

**Van Ness:** They still in California?

**Merkur:** Yeah.

**Van Ness:** Both of them?

**Merkur:** Yeah, both of them are in California in different cities. My dad and I are very, like, similar, with temperament, the most part, we're both like very athletic, into the gym. Like I said, I look just like him, and, like, kind of a calmer temperament, but I do have, like, a hidden temper from my mom. So it's like I'm very calm, and then I'm not. So you can usually see right before I get loud, I get quiet. I've seen my dad cry maybe once. I've sobbed with my mother on the other hand. And I don't know how much of that is gender, cause my mother like watches football while she irons. So, like, also that's what was difficult for me, realizing I was trans. My mother was like masculine to feminine. Like, she liked football, she made sure I was doing sports and like roughhousing, but like she also wears makeup and like waxes and like makes sure she's a pretty Latina and that kind of stuff. So it's mostly good, but moving away has made it easier for me, because I have a little more control on the relationship, and like, how often we talk, and what they can see online.
Van Ness: Yeah.

Merkur: It’s cool.

Van Ness: What about your extended family? Do you have any in New York, or…?

Merkur: Yeah, my cousin Zach is somewhere in the city. I should talk to him at some point. Uh, my dad grew up in Long Beach on Long Island, so I have, like… I call her my fake grandmother, cause all my grandparents are dead but my dad grew up across the street from her, literally across the street, so when I go visit, I can look out the window and see my dad's house as a kid. And like, he has two older sisters, and like, they've all been pretty accepting. I know my Tia Toni, uh, she's not trans but she did change her name at one point from — oh, I don't know what it is, but she goes by Toni now.

Van Ness: That's great!

Merkur: Yeah, that kind of stuff...

Van Ness: Want to take a break?

Merkur: No, it's okay. I'm just trying to fold this.

Van Ness: Okay, no worries.

Merkur: My dad’s side, or, that's my dad’s side. My mom's side - I always forget how many siblings she has. And some of them are dead. They know I’m trans. My mom like told them, so I don’t know how exactly how much they understand. But like, I’m not the first queer person in my family. My aunt was a lesbian, that was probably the first queer AFAB person I knew. Though I don't know if she'd use that word. But, yeah.

Van Ness: Okay. So how long have you been in the city now?

Merkur: Uh, I moved here August 2013, I am living... like, after college, I moved here just over a year ago now. I lived about a block from here. I'm not even kidding.

Van Ness: Where did you go to school?

Merkur: I went to St. John's University in Queens. Yeah, they gave me a lot of financial aid. [laughs]

Van Ness: Nice.

Merkur: Yeah. And I dormed for one year. I did abroad with someone whose nickname was ironically my birth name, which I went by at the time, so that was okay. It was funny. And, yeah,
I did that. I lived in an apartment in Jamaica, and then now I live in, uh, Queerfield, it's a queer collective in Bushwick.

**Van Ness**: What did you, like, study in?

**Merkur**: I studied English, to which a lot of people were confused because I spoke English, to which my retort was always “It's my second language, cut me a break.” But I just really liked writing, and I wanted to use that. There's something, like, I had trouble especially because English is my second language, I had a lot of trouble learning how to read, cause, like, Hooked On Phonics doesn't work with the Spanish perspective, because English doesn't make sense. So like, “enough”, “tough”, “through”, “thorough” all kind of look about exactly the same but are all pronounced very differently. So, going to Hooked On Phonics didn't work, because I'd be, like, reading it out loud, and we'd do that. We had to use the Palo Alto system, so I was a little bit late reading, it was around first grade. It's not too late, but it was like a little bit. Plus I was being bullied, and I liked being read to. [laughs]

**Van Ness**: Do you still like being read to?

**Merkur**: No, now I like reading.

**Van Ness**: Okay.

**Merkur**: I discovered fantasy as a genre. The book that like did it for me was “My Father's Dragon”.

**Van Ness**: What's that about?

**Merkur**: It's just... it's a story this kid tells, his father had a dragon on island Tangerina. The dad would eat tangerines, and the dragon would eat the tangerine peels, and it was like their relationship and I really liked it. I have a tattoo of a dragon, so yeah.

**Van Ness**: Is it eating a tangerine?

**Merkur**: No! [laughs]

**Van Ness**: I was wondering...

**Merkur**: No, that'd be too many levels, cause I also really like... I remember reading “Eragon” when I was around 8, and seeing that this fifteen year old was writing this book. I was like “I can do that! I'm only 8!” So I started trying to write my first novel, which involved, like, guys, and they'd be made over into cooler guys...

**Van Ness**: Okay.

**Merkur**: 'cause I always really saw myself, like, all my avatars were dudes.
Van Ness: Yeah. That's funny.

Merkur: Yeah. I always just did. I feel like that's a common thing with trans folks, of like “I would like to look like that! I'm gonna make that.” Then you're that online.

Van Ness: True. What was it like when you first moved to New York?

Merkur: Uh, during school? Or when I moved after?

Van Ness: Whatever. Either one, or both.

Merkur: Um, with school it was kind of scary, cause I wasn't used to not checking in with my parents every time I went anywhere. And like, I was very much in a suburban setting, so I would drive, I'd text my parents “I'm going to be out this time, and I'll be home then”. And even then, that was very little, cause I didn't start, like, doing teenage stuff 'til I was seventeen. I just went home all the time. I didn't know people, didn't have friends. I also didn't have friends in middle school, and didn't realize that until I was in high school and people started asking me to hang out. I was like “OOOH!” Oh, you mean most people don't hang out with their parents all day? Yeah. [laughs] I would just read a lot, I'd read, like, the comics in the newspaper and like books. And then I like started exploring the internet, in like high school cause my friends were on it. And I made friends online, and that was cool. I liked a username that one of my friends gave me for Neopets, like way back when, and I used that until I was like 18 for everything, ever. So I always knew if my friend had been on there first, because the username wouldn't be available. [laughs]

Van Ness: That's funny.

Merkur: Yeah, but like a lot of ways, I was just like “I'm bad at naming stuff.” So I just took that name for like my online stuff, especially cause like you can't be yourself online. Though, like, now, like, everyone's like “Here's my Facebook and my face and my exact address. Here I will be until this time. I will be leaving then.” It can be a little creepy, yeah.

Van Ness: Oh yeah.

Merkur: So yeah, I moved, and like I got really involved, uh — like almost immediately in Taking Back Queens, which is a D.I.Y. booking agency in Queens where we do like punk shows and pop punk shows. And I just immediately just got immersed. That was my “in” into the music scene, cause I was really into punk, like folk punk. So it was nice to just kind of — I just sort of fell in. I saw an ad at St. John's University as an artist for an acoustic show that was for free. Like, okay, I'm going to take my camera, cause it was like a security blanket, cause like I come to the show by myself, because I have a camera, and I have a task. So I went there and like talked to the folks. I got myself to play a show there next week, and I just started volunteering. And I'm, like, the Assistant Director now. We're a part of the Punk Island Collective, which is, like, it's a collective, cause there's a music festival once a year, uh, often on Father's Day. This year it's
gonna be on, like, Randall's Island. It was last year. It's been on Governor's and Staten Island. So I just immediately got involved in the punk scene and through the punk scene, and especially Brooklyn punk scene, I've been meeting just a lot of queer punk people, a lot of non-binary and other types of trans folks and just — I was like buried in it, and that was just kind of where I was. So, for me, that was something I did every weekend. And, like, we still put shows on now, and like I said, we're still part of the collective. I don't know who I would be if the guy who was running it hadn't taken a chance on me that day. Part of the reason — he passed a few months ago, and he had planned a show, and he passed right before it, so we played like, uh, his wake. It was a little dark. But yeah, a lot of who I am today I have to thank to Dick Barker.

Van Ness: Oh my lord. What was your relationship with them?

Merkur: It wasn't particularly close, but it was the fact that he did take a chance. Not just on me, but on so many other, like, teens, like the cohort was like these three boys from Queens that were all in high school, and like they would set up the mic stands, then we just ran shows. And I met a lot of cool people like Pierce Lightning and other people, and, uh, Kirby, and I met all these people, started going to shows where they were playing, which is like Manhattan, Lower East Side, and Brooklyn, and I met more and more people that way. And I just kind of got immersed in this like very colorful queer punk community.

Van Ness: That's cool. Yeah. Are you still involved in that community, or...?

Merkur: Yeah! I'm still part of Punk Island, so I'm there all the time.

Van Ness: Oh yeah?

Merkur: I go to shows as much as I can.

Van Ness: Are you in a band or something, or...?

Merkur: Um, my voice is changing, so I've kind of taken a bit of a hiatus. But I have a band, My Own Confusion. We do folk punk and like alternative emo. I have a full-length that I'm just waiting to get the masters for, and then that's gonna be put out with my old voice. So that's gonna be trippy. 'Cause I've gone from being an alto to a baritone, which is kind of a big drop. I used to be able to hit a C5, and now I can hit an A4, I think? Yeah, and A4. For people who know the note, they'll be like "Oh! I know what that means!"

Van Ness: Yeah.

Merkur: Yeah.

Van Ness: Do you remember any great stories from when you were younger? Like something silly that happened to you, or, I don't know, hilarious? Embarrassing?
**Merkur**: There wasn't a lot of good, funny embarrassing things that happened. I got pantsed once, but that was in jujitsu class, and we were playing a game where you were pulling people down, so that's... Not... Oh no, the story of how I broke my wrist is rather vivid. So, um, I was lifting a lot of weights for track and field cause the shotput — I'm only 5'4, and like the other girls on the team were like 5'8 and like 170 pounds. And I was... not! [laughs] So what everyone else had in size, I had to make up with just, like, power and speed in that moment. Cause shotput, you jump back really quickly. So one exercise we do to strengthen those muscles is a clean, which is, you go way down, you grab the barbell, and you lift it up, and then you use your hands to kind of pop forward and catch it, putting your elbows up and squatting down. Doing a squat like that? Because it has a lot of boost, a lot of energy, and a lot of leg power, which is what you need. So I was cleaning 125 pounds. I did that, except I didn't get my elbows up, and all of a sudden there was just a snap.

**Van Ness**: Oww.

**Merkur**: Yeah. And, like, my spotter, who was about my same size, but like an inch taller than me, she was like “Oh god!” She comes up to me and like hurries up, and she's like... it hurts but it was also numb at the same time, and it was swollen, it was just kind of like this. I was like “I think I'm gonna have my mom pick me up!” [laughs] And we go to urgent care to get it checked out. My coach was like “You're gonna be fine. Put some tape on it, come back tomorrow.” Turns out it was fractured! So I come back in, like, this blue cast, which I'm so excited to have everyone sign, cause I'd never had a broken bone before. It's kind of like...

**Van Ness**: That's funny.

**Merkur**: Yeah! I was like “Well, I guess I can have everyone sign it now.” I just came back and saw my coach, and was like “Yeah, it wasn't fine.” [laughs] Yeah.

**Van Ness**: That the only time you ever had a cast?

**Merkur**: No, I broke my toe, uh, December 2015, 2016, one of those. Yeah, like 2016. ‘Cause I got this tattoo. I got a tattoo about the same week. Basically, I had been dumped via text on a Monday, broken my toe... er... booked a tattoo appointment very impulsively, [broke] my tattoo because it was very windy, and the door where I was living — I wasn't really legally living there, but, like, the door flew open, there's this big plastic pane that functioned kind of like a window, it just fell on my toe. My toenail is still ugly from this. And, like, it's still ugly, and I was just “Oh, no, I probably broke my toenail. I'm gonna lose it. Like, it's fine, I'm just trying to go to sleep. It's like 2 AM, it's like “I'm in pain! I should probably go to the hospital. So I walk across the street to the hospital.

**Van Ness**: Oh.

**Merkur**: Just, I go there first thing in the morning...

**Van Ness**: It's across the street! [laughs]
Merkur: It was across the street, but I walk to the hospital. Which they thought — they were just “did you walked here?” I was like “Yeah! I live across the street.” They were like “alright, sir” then they look at my ID, it’s like “we need you to pee in a cup to make sure you’re not pregnant.” Also I was on my period... [laughs]

Van Ness: So much.

Merkur: There was a lot going on this week. So I like... here’s what’s cool. Before I realized I’d broken it, I went to the tattoo consult. I had the consult for the tattoo, then I go back a few days later. I’m on crutches and they’re like “You just got worse as this week went along!” It’s like “Yeah, I did!” So I’m like...

Van Ness: No joke.

Merkur: Yeah, I had a broken toe, I had like this boot on it, where, like, it was ridiculous cause like whatever, I broke my toe, and I had this big boot and was so incapacitated. I made me rethink a lot about, like, kind of my ableistic tendencies, cause I had never really had an injury like that before. It was kind of wicked. But yeah, I got a really good tattoo, and a hell of a really no good, very bad week. Where yeah, it’s um... it’s a tattoo from one of my favorite bands, Ramshackle Glory, which is... the singer and writer is Pat the Bunny. The song is “Your Heart is a Muscle The Size of Your Fist. Keep on Loving, Keep on Fighting and Hold on for Your Life.” Which is something I already had liked and I just really needed for myself in that moment. And, like, it looks dope. It’s a hand holding a heart with the banner saying “keep on loving, keep on fighting”.

Van Ness: Cool.

Merkur: Yeah. I’ve gotten, uh, the three tattoos on this arm from the same shop in the Bowery. So I kind of of like how it’s a consistent but different aesthetic, cause it’s been a different artist each time.

Van Ness: Oh?

Merkur: Yeah.

Van Ness: Cool. Who’s the most important person in your life?

Merkur: My cat. [laughs] Does that count?

Van Ness: Yeah! Sure!

Merkur: Yeah, I call her my daughter, cause she’s four years old and drives my life crazy and she’s probably gonna give me gray hairs. [laughs]
Van Ness: Yeah?

Merkur: Yeah, she also scratches me a lot. She's not very nice. I don't know why I love her so much. She wakes me up in the middle of the night. She's bitten my face.

Van Ness: Oh my god. [laughs]

Merkur: Yeah! We call her Reeka. Uh, when we adopted her from the ASPCA her name was Eureka, but my mom's Costa Rican, so we're like “Nah, let's call her Reeka!” So we just spell it R-e-e-k-a, and pronounce it “Rica”.

Van Ness: What does she look like?

Merkur: She's a little calico chubby beach pillow. Like... she does this thing that I call “the chicken dinner”. Cause, she looks... you know when you buy rotisserie chicken from the grocery store? It looks like you have it upside down, with, like, her drumsticks sticking up, and she just like lies on her back and just looks really cute. I describe her as a “people ho”, cause she loves humans but hates other cats. We currently have two other cats on my floor, so that's fun. 'Cause she gets along okay with one of them, the other one she fights with. Unless he's eating her food, in which case she's fine with it. Which bugs me, 'cause I feel like she should fight that.

Van Ness: Yeah.

Merkur: I don't know.

Van Ness: Eh, who knows?

Merkur: You gotta raise someone...

Van Ness: Cat logic.

Merkur: Yeah! They say that cats release like something that makes you obsessed with them, and I'm not sure that they're wrong. Once upon a time they were worshipped upon as gods. They've never forgotten this lesson.

Van Ness: That is very true.

Merkur: Yeah.

Van Ness: What about someone who's inspired you in your life?

Merkur: I guess Laura Jane Grace, the singer of Against Me!, just because she's like... she writes, she's trans, she's a singer/songwriter, she, like, is a parent... it's like she's... kind of does all the things that I really wanted to do when I was younger, cause I really wanted to go on tour with my band. I've gone on tour with my band, and it was such a great experience. And I want to be
able to, like, continue to do that. I’ve learned a lot of things from her, like getting tattooed as a way to treat depression. And also just as a trans person being tattooed to like modify my body in a way that makes me more comfortable. Something I... so I really look up to her in a lot of ways. It’s also, like... oh, fuck... I was reading something like really good recently that I liked. I, um... I guess, like, I like Leslie Feinberg’s writing. Again, another writer who’s like trans. The fact that like, ze was Jewish, and hir book kind of goes through all of that. That was really cool. Yeah, a lot of my inspirations come from writers and stuff.

Van Ness: Indeed.

Merkur: Yeah.

Van Ness: What did community mean to you?

Merkur: I’m not sure I’ve defined it. I guess people who...

Van Ness: What does it look like right now?

Merkur: I mean right now I live with 10 people, so that’s kind of community. It’s a queer collective where we try to like... we’re trying to live by the ideals that we spout, like sharing stuff. So like, it’s totally normal and acceptable for people to go to a different floor and be like “Hey! Do you have any potatoes, milk, sugar?” There was this really good snowy day that we had recently that was just kind of beautiful, cause, uh, one person ordered pizza, some else came down and was like “Does anyone have hot chocolate?” I’m like “I have hot chocolate.” So they made hot chocolate, another roommate and I made vegan banana muffins, and we just were all kind of hanging out and just very much putting what we had and putting them together so we all had something. And I thought that was really beautiful. I guess community to me means sharing banana muffins.

Van Ness: Deep.

Merkur: [laughs] A little bit, yeah. I had a lot of bananas, one of my roommates used to be a bakery chef and had like a delivery business. Yeah, it was like a really cool and like family-type moment and I enjoyed it.

Van Ness: That's very beautiful.

Merkur: I believe strongly in chosen family. At this point I had two gays sons and one gay cousin. Where it’s like, none of these people are related but like, you know what I mean.

Van Ness: Yeah, no yeah. Tell me more about your chosen family.

Merkur: Uh, my gay cousin - also my punk cousin - because we meet through Taking Back Queens and stuff. And he was like starting on T just when we like started to meet each other, and I was identifying gender non-conforming at that point, and there was one non-binary
person. I remember all three of us were hanging out one day. He told me I did say something that hurt him, but I'm really glad we stayed friends. Cause both of us, like... we both grew very much together. There was a point, we're both true scummy transmedicalists, and we both learned from that around the same time, where like “Oh, no, that's bad!” But we had that phase and that's partially why I was hesitant to come out as non-binary, cause, like, I didn't recognize my dysphoria as real. I thought it was like related to my eating disorder. And I was like “Oh no, this is gender! Whoops.”

**Van Ness:** Can you define “transmedicalist”?

**Merkur:** Uh, a transmedicalist is just kind of a way of thinking of trans identities. It's very gatekeeping, and is often like “unless you experience all this type of dysphoria you are not trans.”

**Van Ness:** Ah, got it.

**Merkur:** If you're trans and you don't wanna medically transition you're not trans. Which, like, isn't true. Like, you do not have to do anything. All you have to do is say “I'm trans” and that makes you trans. And that makes you trans enough. Like, I don't think people choose to do this. A little annoying... [laughs] Like, it would be nice not to have to stick myself with a needle once a week, but I guess I have to.

**Van Ness:** Yeah.

**Merkur:** You know? Yeah.

**Van Ness:** Yeah, you weighed your pros and cons, you know.

**Merkur:** Yeah.

**Van Ness:** I guess you started talking a little bit about your relationship with other trans and GNC folks. Can you talk a little bit more about how you see yourself within the community, or outside of the community, whatever?

**Merkur:** Well, you met me at Grand Street with, uh, Gender Exploration Movement, which like a TGNPOC-focused, uh, like advocacy group. We're actually going to speak at Northeast Trans and People of Color Conference this weekend. Well, next weekend. Whenever this comes out. Some point! I'm... we're going to speak there on kind of like... we wanted to call it “decolonizing”, but they were particular about that word. So we're gonna bring it back in on the back end of “Relearning Gender Beyond the Binary, Outside the Western Perspective”, where I kind of want to talk about, like, especially, like, having grown up with, like, such binary language, like the “x” in “latinx” or the “e”... I want to have a discussion there with a bunch of people who want to have that conversation, ‘cause I don't think this conversation's done, on how do we neutralize but not neuter the Spanish language, in a way that becomes more accepting? And also the six classical genders of Judaism, because I feel like that's mentally
forgotten, especially with like the imperialistic tendencies of Christians and Catholics, in kind of obliterating everything and making it this and that, and like I say this as a person of faith. I have a tattoo of Eve in the Garden of Eden on my arm. Like, religion is important to me and I want to talk about it through that, but I guess within the community I see myself as an advocate, and I'm glad that I'm doing that and want to continue to do that. Like I said, the first time I heard the word transgender I was like “Ah, I'll probably be trans”, and then didn't go back to it for five years. I wanted to be like a more normal part of the conversation, and I want to be present and also make it accessible to people who are closeted. 'Cause I wasn't out in high school. Like, I hung out with a lot of people who were LGBTQ+, but I wasn't out myself. So I kind of want it to be like something so normal, that even if you're scared at least know it for yourself.

**Van Ness:** Yeah. You mentioned that you, like, used to identify as straight and, like, what do you identify as now? Or, how do you identify...?

**Merkur:** Uh, bisexual.

**Van Ness:** ...in all the ways?

**Merkur:** Uh, like, bisexual, queer. I'm a white-passing, mostly-able neurodivergent trans person of color. I think I said white-passing at some point which is important to acknowledge, cause I do get a lot of privilege for that. But yeah, I'm bi-ethnic, is the word I usually use, just because, like, I'm a white Hispanic, so I'm not technically biracial, even though, like, if you look at, like... my mom and I did the DNA thing, so I know for sure that I do have like some Central American indigeneity, but I also have a shit-ton of Spaniard because colonization. I think about that a lot.

**Van Ness:** Yeah.

**Merkur:** And kind of like where my place is with that. Like I've said, I've never found a binary I could agree with. I'm bilingual, I'm bicoastal, I'm bisexual, I'm biethnic.

**Van Ness:** Wow, there you go.

**Merkur:** When I did track and field I was a sprinter and a thrower. I just... I can't pick a side. When someone says “pick a side" I say yes and do everything.

**Van Ness:** [laughs] That's funny.

**Merkur:** Give me a binary, I'll disagree with it right now.

**Van Ness:** [indecipherable]

**Merkur:** I try really hard all the time! [laughs]

**Van Ness:** What does companionship mean to you?
**Merkur:** Can you like define that a little bit more?

**Van Ness:** Umm...

**Merkur:** What do you mean by companionship?

**Van Ness:** I think what they're asking about is, like, what do romantic relationships look like in your life?

**Merkur:** For me?

**Van Ness:** Yeah.

**Merkur:** Umm, well, I'm polyamorous, so that does get complicated. Like, it feels like kind of like every queer person becomes polyamorous nowadays, and, like, we're — the spit chain is all too close. [laughs] People, have, like... if I had mentioned I like someone, they're like “That looks like blank!” I'm just like “Don't say that. I know!” [laughs] “I know!” [laughs] “That looks like you!” “I know! It happens!” Queer culture is dating someone where you both have the same birth name and it's weird. A few months — neither of us go by our birth names anymore, but we had like phonetically the same name and I thought that was funny.

**Van Ness:** That's funny.

**Merkur:** Yeah. It was weird, too.

**Van Ness:** That's weird.

**Merkur:** So like, it's been a lot of... I've been really into researching relationship anarchy, and kinda like what that means for me, and recognizing every person you talk to is a relationship, and then it can be different, and levels of commitment, and like, physicality are totally different, at that's okay. So, for me that's something I'm very much still learning and exploring. Like, I currently have a partner, and I love them a lot, and they're great. I'm not just saying that because they're sitting right next to you. [laughs] They didn't hear you, so it's whatever. Yeah. It's kinda like, I don't know. Romantically speaking, companionship has a lot like, I need people to understand dysphoria. But thankfully, I'm not... like, especially after having top surgery, there's not too much that makes me dysphoric. Well, actually, no, that's a lie. There's a lot of things that make me dysphoric, but not naked. I don't know, does that make sense?

**Van Ness:** Yes. Absolutely.

**Merkur:** Yeah, okay. Yeah.

[both laugh]
**Merkur:** Uh, but yeah. Friendship for me is very important. Like I have a queer platonic partner, which if someone doesn’t know what that means, it’s platonic but on, like, a very deep level. But platonic’s like someone you would, like, move in with, or, like, sign a contract with. Like, they are my emergency contact at hospitals, that kind of like, but not romantic. Like, we say “I love you” but it’s platonic. Yeah.

**Van Ness:** Where do you know them from?

**Merkur:** Tinder. We used to date, then we broke up. And now they’re my best friend, so...

**Van Ness:** Oh, that’s great!

**Merkur:** Yeah. That’s queer. That’s queer culture, is being best friends with your ex.

**Van Ness:** Is there anything else you would like to talk about? I don’t know.

**Merkur:** I guess I would like to talk about, like, tell me a time when you felt seen? It doesn’t happen often, so when I am seen, it is really cool. At my job, uh, as a barista, they’re, like, the company as a whole has a lot of, like, queer people and a good number of trans folks. Like, it’s a barista, it’s queer culture. At my shop particularly, most people are straight, and they all use my pronouns, which are they/them. And, like, with no hesitation, if a customer gets it wrong, like we don’t go out of our way to correct it, but they won’t pretend that that’s my pronoun for whatever moment. So, someone will be like, “Oh yeah! He’s doing a great job on that latte art.” It’s like “Yeah, they are doing a great job.” And just kind of like really subtle. And for me, that feels very seen. Or like, the executive director of Taking Back Queens, she is straight but she like has been learning a lot. Like, there was, uh, like, like a baby butch was at this thing, they were all girls, and she was a lesbian. She’s like 15 probably. But like very short hair, boy’s clothes. At one point, uh, Arlene checks in with, like, uh, her girlfriend’s like “What is this person’s pronouns?” They’re just kind of like “She/her, what else would it be?” cause, like, it doesn’t occur to her.

**Van Ness:** Yeah.

**Merkur:** But I’m in the back with my gay son, who’s like another trans guy. We’re both like being read as dudes, even though I would show up and be like “Do my makeup!” and like, being, like, a little more feminine than I usually am. And, just kind of.. They were talking about — I’m going to talk about menstruation again, but they were talking about “Man, I hate it when you’re putting in a tampon and the applicator falls out.” To which I said “Oh my god, yeah, I hate it when that happens!” They’re like “What the fuck is this guy talking about?” It’s like “Yeah, I hate it when that happens!” And then, like, my gay son, who like, there were too many people in the car so he’s on my lap, he’s like “Oh my god, I hate that too!” They’re like “What are these guys talking about?” It’s like “I guess they have periods?” Or, yeah. And I love the fact that I hang out with so many other trans folks and non-binary folks who also use they/them pronouns. Like, at my job at Grand Street, uh, there’s three youth, like youth peer advocates, uh, all of us are trans-identified. Two of us use they/them, one of us uses he/him, and my direct supervisor
also uses they/them. It's kind of fun just to have this queer family where it's wherever we go it becomes a queer space, cause we make it. We decolonize and just make it queer.

**Van Ness:** That's cool.

**Merkur:** Yeah.

**Van Ness:** Are there other things that people... if like, people didn't know you, like something they need to know to know you?

**Merkur:** Sometimes I hold this back to be a dramatic reveal, but the fact that I speak Spanish fluently and have like a decent Spanish accent, which is I'm not saying it's a big deal cause I've moved around a lot. Like, there's like a big Puerto Rican/Dominican presence in New York City, in California there's a lot of Mexicans. I learned Spanish first in Argentina, my mom's Costa Rican, so I... I also studied abroad in Spain for about a semester, so I learned a lot of words there. So...

**Van Ness:** Come to think of it, how did your family get to Argentina? If neither of your...

**Merkur:** My mom worked there.

**Van Ness:** Okay.

**Merkur:** Yeah, she worked with insurance, she worked with AIG back in the nineties.

**Van Ness:** Okay.

**Merkur:** Um, then she worked with... I think she was working with AIG in the Latin American unit in Buenos Aires. Um, then when the economy collapsed, we were like “Let's get out.” Which unfortunately we couldn't do in 2008. We had a lot of AIG stock, so we were very comfortable until that happened. Then things got a little hard. Which also means I can, like, class switch... whoops... uh, pretty easily. Like I do a lot of code switching being both Latin and Jewish, and like... in Argentina, because it's cheaper and my mom was making a lot of money, we had like a maid and a nanny, so I had a lot of privilege financially as a kid. And then it slowly just kind of slowly went away, especially when the economic crash hit. ‘Cause we had a lot of AIG stock, that was gonna be my college fund, and I kind of just watched it go away on TV in front of my eyes. Like, “Oh! Oh, that sucks!” That's how we bought the house and everything. So, yeah. So I guess the fact that I speak Spanish fluently, so I know what you're saying about me! [laughs] And, just... yeah, I guess the fact that I haven't found a binary that I could ever agree with. Yeah.

**Van Ness:** Um, let's see. This is hard to read.

**Merkur:** Yeah. Do you want to rotate it so you can see it?

**Van Ness:** I don't feel like it.
Merkur: Okay. Wrap-up questions?

Van Ness: Uh, my sister's calling me. Actually, can we pause for a second?

Merkur: Yeah.

Van Ness: All right. So, how do you feel emotionally and mentally and bodily right now?

Merkur: I'm okay. I'm a little tired. I did work today, and I work a lot. I usually work 6 to 7 days.

Van Ness: Oh, wow.

Merkur: So sometimes I don't check in with myself emotionally just so I can get through the thing.

Van Ness: Yeah, that makes sense. Do you only barista, or do you also do the thing?

Merkur: I also do the advocacy thing.

Van Ness: Oh, okay, yeah.

Merkur: So yeah.

Van Ness: It's exhausting.

Merkur: Between that I'm usually pretty tired. I'm feeling pretty good! This was a fun conversation.

Van Ness: That's great! I'm glad.

Merkur: Yeah.

Van Ness: Um, let's see, uhhh... I kind of already asked you that, uhhh... If you want to be remembered for one thing, what would it be?

Merkur: I still wanna write a really good book. It doesn't have to be the next Great American Novel, but I wanna like... but I kind of do! [laughs] So yeah. I guess I want to do that, or like at least... I, like, really like my writing, and even if it is singing and tour... Or like, if I can be known for like one book or one really good album that connects to a lot of people... or a very legitimate legal change when it comes to trans people in the healthcare system. Any one of those three would be fine.

Van Ness: Okay. You know, small goals.
Merkur: Yeah! Small goals! Just, yeah. [laughs]

Van Ness: Is there anything else you wanna add? I don't know. Any last thoughts?

Merkur: Trans is here, and we're gonna keep being here.

Van Ness: Okay, cool.

Merkur: Yeah.

Van Ness: Sweet, cool. Alright, well, thank you so much for the interview.

Merkur: Yeah. Thank you for interviewing me.

Van Ness: Thank you to everyone that's listening. Bye!

Merkur: Bye!