NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

https://www.nyctransoralhistory.org/
http://oralhistory.nypl.org/neighborhoods/trans-history

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

LORENZO VAN NESS

Interviewer: Cleopatra C. Acquaye-Reynolds

Date of Interview: October 29, 2018

Location of Interview: Lorenzo’s apartment, Parkchester, Bronx, New York

Interview Recording URL: http://oralhistory.nypl.org/interviews/lorenzo-van-ness-qz17b1


Transcribed by Alex Melcher (volunteer)

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #114

RIGHTS STATEMENT
The New York Public Library has dedicated this work to the public domain under the terms of a Creative Commons CC0 Dedication by waiving all of its rights to the work worldwide under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights, to the extent allowed by law. Though not required, if you want to credit us as the source, please use the following statement, "From The New York Public Library and the New York City Trans Oral History Project." Doing so helps us track how the work is used and helps justify freely releasing even more content in the future.
Cleopatra Acquaye-Reynolds: Hello. My name is Cleopatra Acquaye, and I will be having a conversation with Lorenzo Van Ness 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 Friday, December 22nd, and this is being recorded at Lorenzo's apartment within Parkchester, New York in the Bronx. So, first if you could tell me your name and your age? If you'd like.

Lorenzo Van Ness: Sure. My name is Lorenzo, and I'm now 29 years old.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Yeah, it was your birthday, wasn't it, right?

Van Ness: Yep, yesterday.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Happy Birthday. What are your gender pronouns?

Van Ness: My pronouns are they and them.

Acquaye-Reynolds: And how would you describe your gender?

Van Ness: My gender is super cute.

Acquaye-Reynolds: So again, when and where were you born?

Van Ness: I was born in 1988 in New York City, probably somewhere in Manhattan.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Tell me about an early encounter you had with a trans community.

Van Ness: Ooh. Early encounters with the trans community, I feel like the first time I heard about trans people was on like Maury or whatever, but it wasn't a positive encounter. It was just one of those shows where it was like, "Guess, is this person trans or not?" So that was probably one of the earliest ideas of trans people that I had.

Acquaye-Reynolds: When was the first time you heard the term trans, or any other terms, like gender-nonconforming, butch, [inaudible], things like that?

Van Ness: Probably still that, like the Maury or whatever, Maury Povich show. I don't think I heard it before that. Definitely not from my family or anything like that.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Why don't you tell me about your early life then. Tell me about your childhood and your family background.

Van Ness: Sure. I was born in New York City, my parents are Dominican, I lived in Washington Heights, I grew up in Washington Heights. Stereotypical Dominican in New York City. I have two siblings, an older brother and an older sister. They are nine and a half and eight years older than me. My mom and my father worked at a hospital as kind of housekeeping, janitorial staff.
We lived in a one-bedroom apartment, all five of us. I slept in the bedroom with my parents, and my brother and sister slept in the living room in a bunk bed.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** What were the circumstances of your life when you were all squished together in that one apartment?

**Van Ness:** It was hard, I think, to be all in a one-bedroom, but I didn't really know anything else. Well I guess I did know some other stuff, because I had lots of other friends who ... Strangely, I don't know, they had two bedrooms or three bedrooms, even though they didn't have working parents. A lot of people were on disability, or on other stuff, and I was like, "How the fuck?" [laughter] "How the fuck" But it worked out. It's fine. My parents were just also really big savers, so even though nobody had their own room, we got to go to the Dominican Republic many times. Almost every year for a while, which is really difficult for—financially, in general. Like I don't know how the hell they pulled it off, I have no idea, although things were much less expensive back then. Yeah, I don't know—and they were able to buy property in their homeland and stuff like that. I don't know, it was complicated. We didn't necessarily have a lot, but we did have a a lot at the same time. We spent our money very strategically, so it was good.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** When you were a kid, did you know what your class background was, compared to now as an adult?

**Van Ness:** I always thought of myself as upper-lower-class, like high-low, poor. Because I was just like, it's not like we're ... We don't have fancy things, but we have everything we need. And we have other stuff, and we can go to Dominican Republic, and we have a house there because my parents saved up for it. I was like, we're not rich, and we're not really middle class, because on the TV it's like you have a house with two cars and whatever, and a dog. So it definitely wasn't middle class, but it's like yeah, we're almost middle class. Like upper lower class.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** Did religion play a part in your life while you were growing up?

**Van Ness:** Yeah, I think. My brother and sister were part of the choir in church, we went to St. Elizabeth Church on 187th Street and ... Audubon? I'm not sure what that street is. Anyways ... Yeah, what is that street? Anyways, it doesn't matter. We went to that church, my brother and sister were part of the choir there, and I would go and rehearse with them sometimes, and listen to them rehearse and stuff. My parents weren't really that spiritual until my mother's mother passed away, then all of a sudden she was in church every week and everything. Fear of mortality and all that good stuff. I wasn't baptized when I was born, unlike my brother and sister. I was baptized when I was in the 8th grade. I had to go to catechism class. I got baptism and my first communion all in one, it was like a package deal. Which is funny. But I had to go to classes with a bunch of other people that were not really my age, I was one of the younger people in that group actually. I was one of the youngest folks in the group. A lot of people were much older, like in their teams, or one person was at least, like twenty something. But we all went to Saturday class, and we studied things about God and Jesus, and I was like, "Yeah, I'm going to do my homework." I always did my homework, even though nobody else did their homework. I was like, whatever, homework, yeah, homework. It was interesting to read about
the Bible or whatever, do little silly activities that are for kids, that were even too young for me I think. I don't know why these workbooks were ... But we were like the adult group. They just looped, everyone that was above 10, they just looped into one adult catechism class. And totally for a while I definitely thought I was Jesus, because I was like, I am so sad, and God will clearly appear and be like, "You are my child, and you are special." Yeah, it's going to happen when I get baptized." It didn't happen, and I was upset, but I was like like, whatever. I guess I'm just sad. That was hard. But yeah, religion was complicated. We're Catholic, but like most Catholics, not super practicing.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Do you identify as Catholic right now?

Van Ness: I don't know if I identify as Catholic. I identify as having grown up Catholic, but I don't necessarily believe in all the things, all the tenets of Catholicism. I believe in a lot of different things, and I don't necessary believe in, Jesus was our Lord and Savior and all that good stuff. I'm like, whatever, he was probably a dude, most likely, and he was probably cool and shit. He probably had a lot of good stuff to say if he actually existed. And also he was black. Anyway, I don't know, but I also believe in the universe, and energy, and spiritual energy, and just lots of other stuff that aren't necessarily related to Catholicism. And I totally believe in some Wiccan stuff, and the earth and energy and all that good stuff. I don't know, I think I'm a mix of things right now.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Going back to your family, it sounds like you have a mom and a dad, and two siblings, a brother and a sister.


Acquaye-Reynolds: And what's your relationship like with them?

Van Ness: I'm not super close with most of them, or really any of them, but as I've gotten older I've definitely gotten closer and closer to them. I don't know what that's about. I guess, something. But I don't know, I would say that it's like a distant, loving relationship for most of them. My dad, I don't talk to at all, because he was just a person that I don't respect very much actually, and a person that doesn't respect me very much either, so I've learned to live without him and that's fine. My mom, I love her a lot, she's a weirdo, but I love her still. She's a little distant, not really great at communicating her feelings, but whatever, she does what she can do. And she loves me a lot in her own way, so it's very nice. Then my brother and sister, I love them, too. We all have our things. A, we're all stubborn, and we're all kind of douchey in our own way, but whatever. We love each other for the most part. We try to be there for each other. Then around trans stuff, my mother and my brother and sister, for the most part, have things down in terms of the pronouns, but it's been more than seven years since I came out to them, so I fucking hope they would. Although I definitely can tell that sometimes they talk about me behind my back with my birth name, so that. My dad doesn't quite get it yet. I haven't talked to him in years. He texted me this year for the first time for my birthday, and used my actual name. I didn't really write back. I just wrote back like "Thanks." So I don't have a super close relationship with folks, but I have some relationship with them, and it's nice. I like it. I like that
pseudo distant relationship, because that way I don't have to ... You know, family sometimes just gets overwhelming, and I'd rather enjoy the good times than spend too much time with them and then hate them forever.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** Who have been the most important people in your life?

**Van Ness:** The most important people in my life, that's a hard one. I think some of the most important people in my life, probably a lot of teachers, people who I've seen as teachers and mentors, even though I never had a formal mentorship or anything. Mostly a lot of women of color who are just super cool, and have helped me learn more about myself, and learn more about the world, and some queer folks that may not be people of color. I don't know, just random people. Also obviously, Freddie Mercury, and [inaudible] Cruz, and Selena.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** Of course.

**Van Ness:** They've been very important in my life. Where would I be without them? Don't know.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** What communities are you a part of now? In comparison to the past?

**Van Ness:** Communities I'm a part of. I've been a part of lots of different communities. Right now I guess I'm in ... well I'm still in the queer and trans people of color community. I'm in the kind of social justice community. Then, I'm getting in that kind of older folk, not middle-age, but slightly older community, since I'm not hanging out with 19-year-olds any more. Yeah, I don't know. Just that, I guess. Lots of different random groups of people, because I still hang out with some people from my college, and I still hang out with other different communities, but I don't know.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** Do you have any particular political homes?

**Van Ness:** Yeah, in terms of other communities that I was a part of ... I don't know if it's necessarily ... I guess I did get politicized in some ways. In college I was part of a group called the Queer City Union, and it was more like a family than anything. But it was probably 10 or 15 of us, and we were just super tight for a long time. In my senior year I kind of strayed, because I was also part of student government, and I was just more involved. I just wanted to be more active in community work and social justice work than some folks wanted to be involved in. I know people were busy with school, and people were busy with their lives, but a lot of it was about socializing and stuff, but I really wanted to talk to people about what their rights are, and how to get social services and stuff like that, and how to access the different resources and stuff, and that wasn't necessarily what everyone wanted to do, so I kind of was on my own senior year. But before that, we literally spent probably a third of the day together every day for like three years. I had Thanksgiving dinners with them, and Christmases, and new years, and parties, and thirsty Thursdays. Just lots of random ... I had my first kiss there, all these random different ... It was a really nice family, community. There was also a lot of drama around there, but I guess, that's any family. Wouldn't be a family without drama.
Acquaye-Reynolds: How did you first learn about, or encounter, other trans people?

Van Ness: It would definitely be in college. I learned about trans people before college, for sure, because I remember in high school I was in therapy, and my therapist and I would ... We definitely knew about trans people, and we would talk about it. She was this big old lesbian, and she was pretty trans-masculine, but didn't identify that way, I think. We would sometimes talk in a derogatory way about trans people, we'd be like, "Those crazy people who want to change their bodies, that's crazy." So it's kind of ironic and funny. Anyways, in college I started meeting trans people at school, and I didn't realize it until my freshman year at the spring fling, so like 2007. We had a spring fling, and it was a drag spring fling, which we had every year, and it was my first time dressing in drag really, I was always a tomboy, but it was my first time dressing intentionally in drag. I bound my chest with these bandages, and stole my brother's clothes and whatever, and then I was at the party and I was just like, "Oh God, my chest, it hurts so bad, binding is awful." This boy came up to me and he was like, "Yeah, that's why I just chopped them off." I was like, "What? What are you talking about?" Then I was like, whoa, he's trans, it's crazy! I never knew all this time!" That was the first time I knew that I met a trans person, and it was cool and weird, and I was just like, "what, this is a real thing that people do, and they're just regular people, and whatever". Then I met some other folks that were gender nonconforming, and other folks, and then I was taking classes. I took one class that was 'homosexuality and religion', and we talked a lot about gender and gender roles and stuff, so I was thinking more about gender roles, and opening my mind more to different ideas about gender, so it was really cool. The combination of that, and meeting trans folks, and talking to people about gender, really got me to understand trans people a lot more, and not be a douche. Because I was definitely a douche before.

Acquaye-Reynolds: What was it like getting more involved in trans communities? What did you get out of it, what did you enjoy? Any struggles you had?

Van Ness: What did I get out of being in a trans community? I think I just got a lot of friends. A lot of friendships, a lot of love, a lot of acceptance of who I was, because even before I even identified as trans I was a tomboy, and it was okay to be a tomboy. That's fine. I didn't have to be anything more or anything less. I think it took a while for me to understand that I was trans, and to accept that I was trans, because I was really hard on myself for it. I had a little bit of whatever third-wave feminism bullshit happening, feminazi bullshit in my head, where I was just like, "If I'm trans I am insulting all womanhood." Through my friendships and through all the love of the community, I was able to finally accept myself and be like, "you know what, if this is what I need, this is what I need. It doesn't mean I'm betraying womanhood. Like what the fuck? It's fine." Even though I had a lot of friends that were trans identified, it was hard for me to accept that I was trans. Then on top of that it was hard for me to accept that I wanted to do any gender-affirming treatment stuff. Taking hormones was really hard for me to decide. It took a long, long time. Just a better understanding of myself, I think.

Acquaye-Reynolds: How do you think trans communities have changed over the years? I would also like to hear how you think feminazis play a role in that as well.
Van Ness: [laugher] I think trans communities have changed with the years. Obviously there's more awareness now of trans issues and trans-ness in general. Now young people are like, "Yeah, I'm trans," and they're like five years old, and you're like “oh shit, what the fuck?” When I was five years old I was like, "What is dyke? What's a dyke, mommy? Is that a thing that holds water back?" You know, things like that. It's just like ... I'm not that old, but things have drastically changed in the last 10, 15 years. It's just like an explosion of media and acknowledgement of trans people, and more language around it, and more conversations around it, so it's just been really extreme. I think the impact of really messed-up ... What is it, TERFs?

Acquaye-Reynolds: What does TERF stand for?


Acquaye-Reynolds: Trans exclusionary...

Van Ness: Say it.

Acquaye-Reynolds: TERF, meaning trans-exclusionary radical feminists.

Van Ness: Yeah, there you go, those people. I think they existed before and they were against trans people, and they still exist now and they're still against trans people. I don't know, they give us something to fight against together. I don't know otherwise what their impact has been on the trans community.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Sort of glass half full perspective of it I guess.

Van Ness: Yeah. I don't think they've held us back necessarily. Not specifically, because it's not just TERFs who have really impacted trans people, it's all cis people who are problematic. And even trans people who are problematic have held back trans people. But we all have had an impact on the trans community. So yeah, we did that.

Acquaye-Reynolds: How do you see yourself in this moment of increased trans visibility?

Van Ness: I think I see myself as someone who is super out, and always talks about being trans, and I don't know, I try to be super, super visible. I see myself as someone who has a responsibility to talk about people because of my privilege in terms of, I am often perceived as a male even though I don't identify that way. That gives me a lot of privilege, and safety unfortunately, because we have a horrible patriarchy, anyways. I think I definitely—from that place of safety I can definitely make an impact, not only with talking to cis people about trans things, but also talking to trans people, and talking to men about things, and just trying to make an impact with people. Being like, "Hey, you should probably figure your things out, and let's talk about sexism, or let's talk about this transphobia," and "That's not okay." So that.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Changing the topic completely, who do you party with?
Van Ness: Who do I party with? I don't really party a lot at all.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Did you used to party a lot more?

Van Ness: I used to party so much. Oh man, when I was in my early 20s, even when I was a teenager and in my early 20s, those were great times. Before I used to sneak into bars all the time. I never drank until college, but then as soon as I got into college everyone was like, "Let's sneak into a bar," so I was like, "Oh shit." I got a fake ID. I had this ID that was ridiculous, and it was some south Asian woman with long hair. It did not look anything like me, but the gay bars did not care. They would just look at the ID and be like, "Right. I guess you have an ID, go in." And I was like, sweet, win. Then eventually I got these other fake IDs that actually had my pictures on it, but then at that time it was when I was transitioning more physically, and I had just cut my hair and stuff, so that I didn't really look at the pictures, so it was sometimes hard to get into bars, because they didn't think it was me. So that was complicated. Yeah, I used to party. I used to go to bars by myself. I used to go to parties like myself, I used to go to parties like [inaudible] Cupcake, I used to go to Choice Cunts, I used to go ... I never went to Sweat. I went to Sweat once. I used to go to ... What else? I don't know, lots of random things. I guess I went a few times to Hot Rabbit, which is still around. Yeah, I used to go to those random parties back in the day, when everything was in Williamsburg in 2006, 2007. Yeah, every party was like in Williamsburg, or downtown Manhattan. Now things are a little bit more scattered, a little. Yeah, I don't know, it was just more complicated I guess. I don't really go to parties. I go to parties now and I'm like oh great, I don't know anyone, and I don't really want to know anybody, because I don't like anyone. Before I was just like "yeah, I want to meet new people and make new friends". And I would, I would go and just meet people and talk to them, and whatever. I would get a drink, and I'd be like "Hey, what's your name? My name's Lorenzo." And they'd be like, let's ... But now I go to a party and I don't talk to one human, and I leave 20 minutes later, and that's it.

Acquaye-Reynolds: What is that attributed to?

Van Ness: I guess I'm a little bit more ant-social now, I'm a little bit less tolerant of people's bullshit now. I'm like, "You just said something kind of racist, I don't need to be around you, I'm good. Got to go, bye." Before it was just like, "I just want to meet people, I don't really know everybody." Now I'm just like, "I don't need to meet people. I've met a lot of people. I'm good."[Laughs] I'd rather have quality over quantity.

Acquaye-Reynolds: It sounds like you've been in a lot of, maybe, multi-gendered spaces, spaces with a focus or center on lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender, when it's really lesbian-gay-bisexual. Do you identify with any of those LGB communities, and if so, what's it been like being trans in those spaces?

Van Ness: I think a lot of the time in the past, even when I identified as a lesbian, and I mostly hung out in lesbian spaces, I didn't really hang out in spaces with gay men or trans women, because that's just how our community is divided, unfortunately. There's not really a lot of
places that are multi-gender, there's mostly places that are lesbian and trans-masculine, and places that are gay man, and trans feminine. Or sometimes there's gay men and trans-masculine, but really all the time. So I mostly hung out in spaces that were lesbian-centered, woman centered. At first it was fine when I was just a tomboy, and everyone was like, "Yeah, you're a tomboy, let's do it." Although everyone of course always expected things. People expect things of masculine presenting people, they expect you to be aggressive, or be the first person to make a move, or be like the boy in a relationship, and pay for the meal, and you're like, "Ha ha ha, no. That's cute, no." So that. But afterward, when I started being read more as masculine, or as a boy, people really had an issue with me sometimes in lesbian spaces. There was one time I wasn't allowed to go into a bar because they were like, "This is a women's party. Are you sure you want to go in there?" I was like, "Yeah, my friend is in there. I just want to say hello to them." And they were like, "I don't know if you want to go in there." I'm like, "I do." They just kept being like, "It's an all woman party, it's probably not a place for you." I'm like, "Uh, I don't know what to say here." So that, and I've definitely had arguments with people about being trans, and people being like, "You're a woman, why are you pretending to be a man?" Things like that. So it was a little challenging, but whatever. I think that's also part of the reason that I have shied away from spaces. They're not super trans friendly, unless they're intentionally trans. They're not really intentionally trans parties, as far as I know. There used to be original plumming parties, those were great. But then also those parties are predominantly white, so then it's complicated. There's not really trans-masculine parties, or trans-masculine people of color parties, or trans people of color parties at all. Then people also often just think of binary genders, so if they read you as a boy then they're just like, "You're a boy. Are you a straight boy or a gay boy?" The end. That's it.

I don't even remember what the question was any more, but all of these things.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Thank you. That definitely answered the question.

Van Ness: But I still identify as a dyke because ... I don't know, I just do.

Acquaye-Reynolds: That leads me tooth next question, of what aspects of your identity are most important to you, and what has shaped your sense of who you are?

Van Ness: I think my aspects of my identity that are most important to me are definitely my Dominican-ness, my queerness, my assigned female-at-birth-ness, my pretty-ness, my friendliness, my Sagicorn. A bunch of different things. Then my mathematical brain, my logical brain, my logical [inaudible] brain. Those things are kind of most important to me. I feel like they've shaped my life, because I don't know, it's just the way I work. I'm a Sagittarius, I always ask a lot of questions, I want to understand things. I'm also logical and reasoning, so I'm like, "What you just said did not equal itself. I don't understand. Can you explain this better, or different, so I can understand it from a different perspective?" When people are saying "X equals Y," I'm like "Wait, what? I don't understand. We need to continue to have this conversation."

Acquaye-Reynolds: How does being trans, or more particularly non-binary and gender nonconforming, relate to the other aspects of your identity?
**Van Ness:** Well I'm never not trans, so I don't know, being trans and Latino, and being trans masculine, being Dominican, being pretty. I guess they just are. It's all that I am, so they relate to each other because they're all parts of me. I think being trans and Latino also, in particular, has made me really passionate about helping a lot of trans Latinos, folks who don't have the privilege of having been born here in the United States, or who don't have the privilege of being citizens or residents or whatever, having that kind of privilege. So I've been really excited about using my Spanish language skills to help people, and to serve people, and to provide resources to people, to open up different resources to people.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** How do you understand your gender?

**Van Ness:** I don't know, just queer and cute and that's about it. It's complicated, it's boyish, it's girlish, it's pretty, it's frilly. But not too frilly sometimes... Very elegant. I'm an elegant dame, if I may say so myself. But I'm also like a cute little boy, with an I. All that stuff. So I do identify as a cub, just because I'm big and hairy. Oh totally, I totally am a feminist bro.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** Yeah.

**Van Ness:** Yeah, I do, but like as a feminist bro. I don't play that shit. Yeah. I always wanted to make a comic strip called feminist frat boys, and they would be like "Yeah, let's go to the bar man," and they'd be like "Yeah, let's go patronize this shit," and then he'd be like, "Why we got to patronize it? Why can't we patronize that shit? You know what I'm talking about?"

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** Okay.

**Van Ness:** It'd be a lot, but it'd be cute.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** Don't you also identify as Afro-Latinx?

**Van Ness:** A little bit. I identify a little bit as Afro-Latinx. I just don't know much about my roots anyways, and never will.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** How has New York City changed in the years that you've lived here?

**Van Ness:** It's become more of a glamorous kind of chic place to live. And I think a lot of wealth has moved here. A lot of poverty has moved to the outskirts. It's just here, but it's just complicated. There's so many ... I don't know if there's more or less homeless people than there used to be, I just know that people are struggling a lot, and that prices keep going up and up and up. It's just crazy. It's crazy that some bajillionaire will come to New York and buy an apartment in the upper whatever side, or the lower whatever side, for like a million, two million, three million, dollars. But people are trying to pay rent, like $700 rent, and they can't afford that shit.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** What do you do to cope with folks who may not understand your gender?
Van Ness: Depends. Depends on the moment. Sometimes I just walk away and I'm just like, "Whatever, I don't care about you." Other times I try to speak up and be like, "That's not my pronoun," or whatever, or, "I'm not a man," or whatever. It really depends. I also just try to find people that are good allies, who would stand up for me or whatever.

Acquaye-Reynolds: What's your favorite thing about New York City?

Van Ness: I love New York City more than anything I think, but my favorite thing about New York City is just that we never ... You could just go out at 2:00 in the morning and be like, "I want to get a haircut", and you can go somewhere and get a fuckin haircut at 2:00 in the morning. That's how that could happen. You could be like, "Oh man, I really want some jelly beans. It's 4:00 AM. And there will be some pharmacy, some Walgreens somewhere, open with some jelly beans that you can just go grab. That's amazing. I love 24 hour shit. I loved it a lot more in college, nowadays I'm not really awake at that time, but I like the idea that I could wake up in the middle of the night and be like, "Potato chips!" And find a bodega, and just go.

Acquaye-Reynolds: What's the hardest thing about living in New York City?

Van Ness: The hardest thing about living in New York City, I don't know, I think sometimes for me it's just that everybody wants to claim us. Everybody just want to claim it. Everybody's like "New York City based," like fuck you. What? Nah! Why? Just go back. I feel bad being like, "Go back to Minnesota," but I just don't know, everybody... I think the hardest part about it is that people who grew up here are struggling, and they really want to leave, and the people who come here are so excited about all these things that they've brought pretty much, or that have come because of the people who are coming. And I don't know, it's just hard. It's hard to keep up with everything, it's hard to not hate all of the people that move in, and it's hard also because some people really do want to make a home, and some people have been here for like two years. I'm like, all right, you can stay here, whatever. Other people will move here for one or two years and then they'll move out, and then they don't acknowledge the impact they're having in terms of, you raised the rent for someone who could be living in your apartment. Or you didn't buy at the bodega, you bought at the stupid Whole Foods, so now the bodega closed. I don't know, that's just hard.

Acquaye-Reynolds: What's it like being trans in New York City, and how does it compare to other places that you've traveled to or visited?

Van Ness: I haven't really stayed at a lot of other places. I've traveled on vacation to other places, but I really haven't lived anywhere else. So that's a hard question to answer, but I think in New York City there's obviously a huge trans community, so it's better than other places, and there's a lot of resources here. But it's still hard. I think people still don't understand. People still think they understand, and are just like, "Yeah, I totally understand trans-ness. That's what he said." And I'm like, "No, I don't use 'he'. You just did it wrong. You just did it wrong."
**Acquaye-Reynolds:** What particular spaces and places in New York City have been most important to you, and have there been any that you've created that are also important to other people?

**Van Ness:** Places and spaces. Well, ALP, yes, has always been important to me as a community organizing center. Think, places and spaces...[inaudible] genders is always nice, the bar, always had a lot of potential. The Nowhere Bar, I love Nowhere Bar, so good, so much potential. Spaces that I've created myself, back in the day a friend of mine created a Cutie Pop writing circle, which was really nice.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** Say that again?

**Van Ness:** We created a Cutie Pop writing circle.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** Yeah, because you were yawning. I want people to understand you.

**Van Ness:** A Cutie Pop writing circle, and that was really great, and that went on for like a year or more. So that was good times. I think that was a really important space that people really needed at the time, and still might need. I don't know, hopefully they're getting their kicks somewhere else. Then right now I have going Scratch, which is a monthly meeting for trans masculine people of color. Nowhere Bar the third, someday. I just thought it would be nice to have a space for all the trans masculine people to get together, and particularly trans masculine people of color. A, because there's not really lots of spaces for us, B, because sometimes we be failing friends, we just be failing. We need to talk to each other and be like, "Hey friend, what you said was just really not okay. We need to be friends, and we need to figure out a different way to be. And that's cool."

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** Are there aspects of trans community in New York City, past or present, that you would especially want remembered?

**Van Ness:** Yeah. I guess I would everything remembered, although that's not possible. I think remembering Sophie Rivera, and... just all the people.

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** What are the biggest challenges you've faced around being trans?

**Van Ness:** Sorry, the biggest what, challenges?

**Acquaye-Reynolds:** Yeah, what are the biggest challenges you've faced around being trans?

**Van Ness:** I just think people who don't understand. First I think it was me accepting myself, that was one of the biggest challenges, and then after that I think just people not seeing me for who I am. Just seeing me for my beard, or for my high-pitched voice before I took T, or things like that.
Acquaye-Reynolds: How do you think trans issues, slash politics, have changed over the years?

Van Ness: It feels like it's gotten more complex. I don't know, maybe that's just me, but in terms of ... There's just so much that we need to do, and there's just so many different ideas of how to do it, and there's just ... I don't know, I think it's hard to agree sometimes, and it's hard to live and let live sometimes. You can't just be like, "You have a different idea of what trans liberation looks like, and you think that doing X, Y, and Z is going to do it, but I think A, B, and C is going to do it." And we can't just be like, "You go do your thing and I'm going to go do my thing, and hopefully both of them together will work," or separately will work, or whatever. I think people are just like, "Nah, you are doing the wrong thing, and I know the right thing."

And I'm like okay folks, there's no right answer, because if there was a right answer we would have trans liberation. And we would have social justice, and racism would have ended, and all these things. But there's really no one right answer to anything, so we need to find a bunch of different ways to make subtle changes to change society. It's not only about changing laws, and it's not only about changing hearts and minds. It's about doing both, and changing culture, and shifting the paradigm in general. It's a lot of things. But I don't know, it just seems, I think maybe because I've been more and more immersed in it, maybe that's why it seems more complicated over the years. But definitely there's more resources than there used to be, and people are more aware and stuff, so that's important.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Earlier you were talking about just socioeconomic challenges that New Yorkers are facing, and how you faced them when you were a kid. How do you make ends meet now, and what kinds of employment have you had access to?

Van Ness: Right now I work at the Commission on Human Rights. I am an intake coordinator, and basically I help figure out different stuff around intake. I used to do ... Well I kind of process lots of the email that come into our agency, and look over some of the data around what kinds of cases we get and stuff, and then help assign different cases to get called back, and random, just troubleshooting stuff, and trying to support the director of the info line, which is the intake unit, really. Before that I was an associate human rights specialist, which meant that I was doing a lot of know-your-rights trainings for the commission on human rights. Yeah, I'm just doing community organizing work for them. Before that I worked as a paralegal at the New York Legal Assistance Group. First I worked there as the intake paralegal, where I obviously did intake, but I also did cases around public assistance and food stamps, and then I worked there as the LGBTQ law project paralegal, where I did a lot of name changes, I did a lot of advanced directives. Sorry, not advance directives, something directives. What is it? I don't remember. Oh yeah, it's advanced directives. Stuff like that. Then before that I did TED organizing at a agency, the 5th Avenue Committee. I also was a tutor for a while, I couldn't find a job. And I was a consultant at ALP for a minute, for like three months or whatever. I don't know, I've had access to a random ... Lots of office jobs.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Have you ever been discriminated against at your job or school? Either because of gender or aspects of your identity?
Van Ness: Yeah, I mean people have said things here and there in every job that I've been at. There's problematic people everywhere. Aside from not getting my pronouns right cues I don't go by "he" or "she," that's happened a lot, I think people have said things to me like... When I first started working people were like, "It's nice not to be the only woman in the office with a tie." I'm like, "Yeah, I don't identify as a woman, thanks though [Laughs]. They were like, "Oh, oops." And I was like, "Yeah, woops." Just random things. Like internships and stuff, people being like, "Why don't you use your real name?" Things like that. That was before I changed my name legally. Other stuff. I don't know. People have said weird things.

Acquaye-Reynolds: What are your everyday safety concerns?

Van Ness: I don't generally have a lot of safety concerns. I think just recently I've been having safety concerns because I am currently a little injured, and I have my ankle brace, and I'm like, if somebody wanted to beat me up I could totally not do anything about it. I would just get my shit beat up. I couldn't run after them. I could try to fight back, but I wouldn't really be able to do that well. That's not related necessarily to be trans-ness. Sometimes when I dress fem, I do worry. I mean I worry. I do worry, and that actually does prevent me from dressing fem as often as I would like to. Also it's just a lot of work. But when I wear lipstick and people stare at me, or say whatever, or call me a faggot and whatever, that worries me, and I get... So I don't do it as often as I would like to.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Have any of those safety concerns ever involved police or law enforcement?

Van Ness: Not really. Because I'm very light skinned, I've had a lot of privilege, and I don't think I've ever been harassed by the police, really. I was once stopped when I was in high school because they thought that I wasn't in high school, because I used my high school metro card. They were like, "You're too tall to be in high school," and I was like, "Why don't you go do your job? Bother someone else. Someone doing something, anything. Like really? Come on." They were like, "Show us your student ID." I was like, "Really? This is bullshit, but okay, here you go." And they were like, "Woops. Oh, you're really tall, you must play basketball." I was like, "Oh thanks. It was a waste of everyone's time, do you want to continue having this conversation." Except of course I was like, "Oh thank you. Thank you sir, thank you." Same thing, in my head.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Do you feel that you've had to choose between expressing your gender identity and economic security or safety?

Van Ness: Yeah, for sure. When I first started working I cut my hair so that I would look more employable. I've done that actually like two or three times, to be real. But usually my employers, like after the fact I'll be like, "Ha ha, sucker, I'm going to grow a purple mohawk. You can't fire me now." But usually in order to get in the door sometimes I would do that. It's not like I've gone to a job interview in a dress. I would be really self conscious to do that. And I feel like always there's that period in the beginning of the job where I have to dress professionally and masculinely so that people will respect me. Then I could move into perhaps some other ways that I'd like to dress.
Acquaye-Reynolds: I know you wanted to buy property. Did anything come up for you with your gender, and trying to access that type of level of socioeconomic access?

Van Ness: Definitely, for buying property, not too many things. For me, I think definitely my birth name pops up all the time, so people are like, "Who's this?" And I was like, "Yeah, that's my birth name. Don't know how you got it. Totes me though." And they were like, "Oh, woops, okay." Then when I was doing my interview for my coop board they were like, "We did a credit check and this name came up." They were like, "There must be some weird mistake." I was like, "Yeah, nope, it's me, I'm a big trans person. I'm a tranny, look at me." So, that. So I came up and I was afraid that I wouldn't get approved or whatever because of my gender identity, but luckily I don't think it had an impact. Of course probably part of it is because I conformed to the idea of what a man is to them, and I didn't want to correct them when they used the wrong gender pronoun, because I just wanted to get in the door. But I think it's definitely had more of an impact when I was looking for apartments and renting. I remember I've been to... First of all, the credit check thing is annoying. Every time somebody does a credit check my birth name comes up. Also, just looking for apartments, I remember once I went to an apartment and I had nail polish on, and this lady was was showing me the apartment with her kids, and her kids ran up to her mom and they were just like, "Mommy, he's a girl, he's a girl, he has nail polish on, he's a girl." I'm like, "Okie doke. Talk to your children." She didn't say anything to them. She was just laughing. I was like, "No, it's not funny." So random things come up sometimes, but again, I'm very privileged to look like a boy I guess, what people think a boy is. Except for the nail polish, and sometimes lipstick, and sometimes dresses. But you know, depends on the day.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Do you have any experiences with mental health?

Van Ness: Yes, I have a lot of experience with mental health stuff. I guess I've suffered from depression and anxiety forever, and I've been on medication on and off throughout life. I've been to the psych ward a few times, about three times throughout my youth and adulthood. I don't know, pretty much it.

Acquaye-Reynolds: What have been some important sources of support for you over the years?

Van Ness: Important sources of support... Mostly my friendships with folks. My best friend Maria has been a good source of support for me. To some extent my family, I guess, has been a little bit of support in different ways. Yeah, I think it's pretty much it.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Tell me a time when you've felt seen.

Van Ness: Just generally when anyone uses my pronoun right. That's pretty much every time I feel seen.

Acquaye-Reynolds: If you wanted people to hear one thing from you, what would it be?
Van Ness: One thing from me? Just, I don't know, everyone just needs to love each other and chill out. That's pretty much it.

Acquaye-Reynolds: If you wanted to be remembered for one thing, what would it be?

Van Ness: For being hilarious, and being super hot. [Laughs] No, I'm just kidding. Mostly the hilarious thing.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Is there anything else you wanted to add?

Van Ness: I guess that's pretty much most of the stuff about me. I think I am a pretty simple person, but complicated at the same time, and have a lot of things that I learned over the years and whatnot, but I don't know, I just think that folks should just work together to figure things out, and things are hard all the time, and we can do it. Or at least I hope we can.

Acquaye-Reynolds: Right, well thank you so much, Lorenzo Van Ness. You sound like you've been a really strong and important staple for the queer or trans people of color community, within organizing spaces and in general for New Yorkers, and I just want to thank you one more time for your time, and I'll see you soon. Thank you.

Van Ness: Thank you for interviewing me.

Acquaye-Reynolds: No problem.