

**NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**SANTOS ARCE**

**Interviewer:** Lorenzo Van Ness

**Date of Interview:** July 14, 2017

**Location of Interview:** Lorenzo's house

**Transcribed by** Jamie Magyar

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Lorenzo Van Ness: Uh, hello, my name is Lorenzo Van Ness, and I will be having a conversation with, uh, Santos, uh, for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. Uh, this is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. Uh, it's July 1, 2017, and this is being recorded at Lorenzo's house. Great. So, what is your name and your pronoun?

Santos Arce: Uh, my name and pronoun—my name is Santos. Uh, my pronoun is he/him.

Van Ness: Great. So, why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself. Where were you born? All the things.

Arce: Okay, well, um—let's see—I am a musician, and I work as a sex educator. I was born in Brooklyn, New York. Um, let's see... I'm currently 37 years old. I was born in 1980. Um, and, let's see—I—I guess, uh—I guess to start, I was born, um—I'm—I'm Latin, obviously. Um, mostly Venezuelan heritage and, um, my parents moved here in like, the 70's or so. And, um, you know, I grew up in like, a Latin and also very strict, um, religious household.

Van Ness: Uh, what—did you have any siblings or anything?

Arce: Oh, yeah. I have, um—I'm the youngest of three.

Van Ness: Oh, okay, cool.

Arce: Yeah.

Van Ness: And you were born here in Brooklyn.

Arce: I was born here in Brooklyn, yeah.

Van Ness: Great. So, what was it like, uh—what is your earliest memory?

Arce: Oh, wow. One of my earliest memories is, um, looking out the window of my second-floor apartment in East New York and kind of like, running over to my dad while he was eating and like, asking for a piece of something. So, yeah.

Van Ness: That's funny. Food.

Arce: Food, yeah. Food and—and looking out at things longingly [laughter].

Van Ness: Um, so, uh, I guess, what was it like to live in New York—or in Brooklyn—in like, the 80's?

Arce: It was—it was pretty—I mean, it was pretty intense. Um, like, Brooklyn was very different, and I—I feel like I say that a lot to a lot of my friends, um, but like, yeah. It was very, very, very

different, especially East New York. Um, like, I joke about it, but it's true: like, I learned the difference between a gunshot and a firecracker really early, and I'm sure you did, too. Um, and like, you know, it was—it was the 80's, so there was crack, right? So, um, yeah, there were—there were shootouts and—um, like, in—in, uh, elementary school, um, we would like, go in the—in the yard and like, look down and there'd be all these crack vials everywhere, and we knew that we shouldn't touch them, but what we did was we would like, kick them around with our feet and like, make a game of like, organizing them by size and color. So, I mean, it—yeah, it's funny and it's also strange, you know?

Van Ness: Yeah, it's so sad.

Arce: Yeah—yeah, exactly. And like—and like, um—you know, like, it was—there was a lot of desperation, there was a lot of, um—you know, like, folks who were on drugs would come up to you, even if you were little, and like, ask for stuff—demand stuff, so, um, you know, it's kind of a thing—like, I think about how different the city is now, for better or worse, but that's kind of not so prevalent. Um, and I also, like, think about, for better or worse, like, sort of the look of the city now. Like, one of the things that I think about as like, my impression of East New York as a kid is like, cracked sidewalks and abandoned lots, and like, you know, now there's no abandoned lots around, because every square inch is, you know, money that can be generated instead of money wasted back then, and like, the cracked sidewalks kind of is very—like, it's very rare that you look around in one of—in any, like, New York City neighborhood, and you see like, cracked sidewalks to the point that there's like, grass growing out of them, et cetera.

Van Ness: Yeah. And, um, what was your family like? What was it like to grow up with your two siblings and your parents?

Arce: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Um, I mean, we had a small apartment. It was, uh, a three-bedroom and, uh, depending on how many people were there, because some—like, one of my cousins moved up to go to Columbia, um, so—

Van Ness: University?

Arce: University. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Van Ness: I was like—

Arce: It's an important, uh, distinction. Um, but yeah. So, he had one of the bedrooms, and then when I was—when—he was living with us when I was super little, and me and my two sisters were in the—like, one of the bedrooms, all like, kind of bunking together, and obviously my—my parents were cohabiting in the master bedroom. But then, um—yeah, it was—it was a lot. Like, I—it was also very nice. Um, like, I felt—I had a dad who was like, very supportive. Uh, my mom was really strict and, um, you know, at the very least, like, we felt like a cohesive unit. You know, there were certain things that were kind of—kind of intense, like the strictness and—and, um, like—you know, like, the emotional abuse, um, that comes from, um, having parents who were

abused themselves, um, so I didn't really come into my emotions until I was really older. Um, but I will say that it was—you know, I had no idea that were poor, you know, and I felt like—like, well-supported and well provided-for, at least in my scope of things.

Van Ness: What were you like as a kid?

Arce: What was I like as a kid?

Van Ness

: Yeah, what was little Santos like?

Arce: I—I was, um—I was a big nerd. Um, I was—

Van Ness: Was? Nah, I'm just kidding. [laughter]

Arce: No, no! I mean, I still am. I was—I really, really wanted to be a good kid, so I was like, um—yeah, I was the first to fold my hands, I was the first to like, sit up straight, and like, I really wanted like, commendation cards and stuff that teachers gave out. Um, yeah. And I was also, like, lazy about schoolwork, which, I'm lazy about everything, still—um, but it's fine. And, um—yeah, what was I like? I guess, uh, I—I was a—I mean, I was a tomboy, too, which was a big thing for me. Like, um, and I sort of forget that now because, like, I'm a dude, but like, being a kid, it was kind of—it was a big deal, you know, because... And—and being a Jehovah's Witness, like, there were meetings three times a week, and sometimes, like, even going out preaching, like, after or within that, right—um, or whatever. Uh, so I was in a dress a lot of the time, and I was like, "This is fine, I guess. I don't like it." Like, I wasn't really—I wasn't really, um, in touch with why I felt uncomfortable. It felt like, really formal, and the formality felt embarrassing. Um, the gender stuff was like, vaguely uncomfortable, but I didn't have much of a concept of my own, like, gender. I knew that—I knew that, um, there were trans people. That wasn't a question. Um, I mean, one of the things about growing up here is—at least then—was like, all the trash TV. So like, do you—I don't know if you remember *The Richard Bey Show*? *The Richard Bey Show* was like, a really, really trashy TV show. It was like—it was like, kind of the predecessor to—oh, who's that guy?—that—

Van Ness: [Jerry] Springer?

Arce: Springer, exactly. It was like, the predecessor to Springer. So, it was just this really slimy guy in this stage set-up in like, Secaucus, New Jersey, and he had people over who were like, you know—would be perceived as like, weird or trashy, right? And so, um, there were trans people on his show, because that's weird or trashy, right? Um, but—but I was just like, fascinated and afraid. Um, you know, and there was this show called *A Current Affair*, which was also—like, that was Maury Povich.

Van Ness: Oh, yeah, Maury. [laughter]

Arce: Yeah, Maury, and it was a—it was a magazine show and, um, one of the things that stuck in my mind was like, this, um—this exposé on a gym that was only trans people, supposedly. Um, and it was like, you know, video footage of people working out, right? And some people—people, like, had these different presentations, and it was like, “Oh my god. Like, look at these, like”—you know, I don’t want to even finish that sentence, but, yeah. So like, it was kind of like, shocking, and I had this like, fear of like, “If you don’t figure out, like, your femininity, you’re going to end up like that.” Um, and—and I would watch and record, um, documentaries. There’s this HBO documentary that I wish I could watch now called *What Sex Am I?*. And one of the—one of the main things—one of like, the common threads to like, the trans narrative was that it was—like, it was very binary, right? And also it was very, like, life-or-death—like, literally. Like, the stories that I heard, at least on TV, were like, “I’m going to—I’m at a point where I need to kill myself or transition.” And I was like, “Well, that’s not me,” you know? They always knew that they were whatever gender they really were, and, you know, they fought, and they blah blah blah—all this, like, really definite early childhood stuff, too, and I was like, “Well, that’s not me. I just like boys’ toys, and not wearing dresses, and forgetting that I’m a girl,” and all this stuff that’s very trans, but that wasn’t so severe. Um, so, yeah. I mean, I was—I was definitely, like, in conflict with my gender, and I was definitely, like, wanting to be good and wanting to like, follow all the rules, and so like, part of that was, um, being okay with being feminized, or trying to be okay with being feminized. Um, you know, and also, like, my context is—wasn’t really, um—like, I feel like the kids at school, and all that other stuff, um, weren’t like—they weren’t okay with different gender presentations at the time, either. Yeah, I didn’t really have a good, um, touchstone for like—as folks say now, possibility models, right? I didn’t have a good touchstone for that.

Van Ness: Okay. So, in terms of at school, did you have a lot of friends and stuff?

Arce: Yeah, yeah. I had friend—I had friends from like—from church, basically. Um, we weren’t encouraged to have friends at school, um, but, yeah. I would have really, really, really intense friendships.

Van Ness: What was intense about them?

Arce: Well, I basically had crushes on these people.

Van Ness: Oh. [laughter]

Arce: Yeah. Oh, yeah. So, I had crushes on these people—you know, on these, like—I was a little girl, and I had crushes on these little girls, and so it was pretty gay. [laughter] Yeah, so, um—but we—but we had like, really good friendships, and I—yeah, I felt really nice about it.

Van Ness: That’s cool.

Arce: Yeah.

Van Ness: Um, and who was someone that's like—or is really important in your life? Who would you say?

Arce: I'd say my dad. You know, I—um, he's like—he's a weird dude, and he's very, very, very flawed, but, um, like, I think of him as somebody who taught me like, patience and objectivity, and somebody, like, who saw me. Um, you know, and it's—it's kind of a thing—like, as a kid, like, you just want to be seen, like, so badly, you know? And he saw me, and he knew what i liked and, you know, we hung out a lot and we were buds, so...

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

Arce: Yeah.

Van Ness: Um, when did you start, uh, playing music?

Arce: When did I start playing music? Um, I guess I started playing music when my mom went to Venezuela and brought back a cuatro when I was like, six. Um, and, you know, I just kind of had it, and I played around with it and stuff.

Van Ness: What is that? I don't know what it is.

Arce: Oh, what's a cuatro?

Van Ness: Yeah.

Arce: It's a four-string guitar. So it's like, a little—it's kind of like a big ukulele. So if you ever listen to salsa music or anything like that, the guitar is gonna be on—often on a cuatro. A lot of times, you know, with modern music, it's gonna be on a six-string guitar. Um, also, my sister—my eldest sister got a big, um, electric piano, uh, when I was maybe about—I want to say seven or eight, and I like, put up such a fit that I wanted an electric piano as well, so my—my parents got me a Casio SK 5, which is like, a—

Van Ness: [laughter]

Arce: —it's kind of a classic now, and it's—it's little. And, um, I—you know, at that age—I want to say somewhere between six and eight—um, learned by ear, like, how to play all the demo songs.

Van Ness: That's cool.

Arce: Yeah. I mean, that's all i know how to play on piano now, but, um, I—I always like, enjoyed like, just messing around on the cuatro, and then, um, when I was, uh... I guess as I got older, I got more serious about messing around on the cuatro, but it was—you know, I would like, downtune and make it sound like a bass and then play along to the radio, but I had no idea what

like, the correct tuning was. And, uh, when I was like, sixteen or so, this kid, um, was like, starting a band—which never came to fruition, but that’s another story—and he was like, “I need a bass player,” and I was like, “I play bass!” And I’d never touched a bass before, and, um, so I went to the music store that—like, that weekend, and I had all this allowance saved up, because I didn’t do anything. I would just get allow—I would just get money every week. So, um, I had all this allowance saved up, and I went to the music store and I was like, “Give me the cheapest bass you got.”

Van Ness: [laughter]

Arce: And that’s the stupidest thing to say, and so I—they gave me this really shitty bass, but it worked, you know? And as soon as I like—like, it seems like—it almost feels like a lie to say this, but it’s true—it’s like, 100% true. Like, as soon as I like, um, had my hands on a bass in the correct tuning, I was like, “Oh, this is how it works.” And I—I like, figured out how to play bass, like, in a day, but I had essentially been doing all the work, you know, before that, I just didn’t, like—I didn’t—it’s almost like dancing. Like, if you know the right steps, you can do the dance, but if you have the movement in your body, you’re ready to do it. Um, so, yeah. That’s how I—that’s how I learned how to play bass, and how I—how I was playing music. Um, and, yeah. Yeah.

Van Ness: That’s cool. What, um—did you listen to a lot of music?

Arce: Oh, yeah.

Van Ness: What were your bands? Who were your—who were your people?

Arce: Who were my people? I mean, I really liked, um, punk rock at the time. Um, and at the time, uh, everybody who I—I didn’t know any punks. I knew kids who were hardcore kids, and hardcore and punk is like—it’s the same thing, really. It’s like—there’s like, a splosh more metal in hardcore. Um, but like, I liked bands from the Epitaph [Records] label at the time, so like, Rancid—who I still like. I’m in a Rancid cover band now—and, um, NOFX and Pennywise, and all the like, 90’s, um, punk bands. And then, um, there were also, like, hardcore bands like—um, I guess the hard—and it’s always, like, New York hardcore, right, which is great, because we’re talking about New York, right? So, like, the New York hardcore bands at the time that I really liked, um, were Shelter—I think Shelter is New York—Warzone, definitely—um, and like, um, I guess they’re not New York, technically, but, um, 7 Seconds. And like, um, it was—one of the things that I liked most about hardcore was like, it was very, very bass-heavy, and like, you know, the bass players were like, front and center, so I—it was easy for me to like that stuff. Yeah.

Van Ness: Let’s see... What else did you do when you were a teenager? Or was it mostly music and...?

Arce: It was—it was mostly music. Um, I dr—I was really into drawing, and I used drawing as an outlet for like, things that I wanted to do. Um, when I moved out, which is funny—when I moved out of my parents’ house, like, I didn’t have that, um—those like, really intense aspirations to do

things, and I just did them, so I kind of stopped drawing ever since. Like, I draw from time, but I don't—I don't draw out of like, need. But like, when I was a kid, I would draw, like—and I only drew dudes, [laughter] so, that's a thing—but, um, I would draw out of like, you know, something as simple as like, "I wish I could wear those pants, but my parents won't let me, so I'm going to draw the pants that I want to wear," um, or like, you know, "I wish I could go on a date," or whatever. Um, and—and yeah, that's definitely one of the things that I did. But, um, as soon as I was, uh, able to like, kind of hang out on my own, like, I would go—I would just walk, um—like, go to the West Fourth Street station and just walk east, and like, walk that whole strip, uh, from like 8th Street to like, St. Mark's Place. Um—

Van Ness: Wow. How was it back then?

Arce: It was—I mean, my memory of it was, I liked it a lot. There were a lot of head shops. There were a lot of like, t-shirts and patches to buy. Now it's kind of like, no big deal. It's like any other street. Um, but they were—there were a lot of head shops, and crystals, and you could buy knives there back then—and I've always been obsessed with knives for some reason—um, and, uh, just like, other young folks who like, you meet and it's as simple as, "Oh, I like your patch," and then you start talking, and then maybe you end up in a band together for a while. But, um, it—it was—yeah, I remember it being like—like, really wanting to go there because it was like, um—it was like, all of the things that I wanted to be, like—oh, right, and piercing was like, a big thing—like, tattoos and piercings, especially at my age at the time, but also like, because of the times—like, because of the 90's. Um, it was like, a really big deal to have a piercing or a tattoo. So like, a lot of my friends—like, I would go—yeah, I would go down that street, and we would go to like, N's, which is now, I don't know, maybe in the East Village, still. N's kind of came down with that, like, explosion thing that happened in the East Village, but it used to be on—on West 4th Street—I mean, I'm sorry, West 8th Street, um, and it was like, a—kind of like an alternative clothing store, in a way, but then with, um, piercing in the back. Um, so I would go there, because they wouldn't really card. And I would go with my friends and like, watch them get pierced, and stuff like that.

Van Ness: What was the first piercing or tattoo that you got?

Arce: What was—the first tattoo that I got was, um, this star—well, you can't see—y'all can't see it, but it's a star—a little star on the inside of my wrist, um, and I don't identify as this now, um, but I heard this like—uh, this thing about like, the lesbian star.

Van Ness: [laughter] Yeah, it was like, "Gay!"

Arce: [shouting] GAY! Way gay. That like, in the 50's, if you were a masculine-presenting, uh, quote-unquote "lesbian," which is like—that translates to trans now, in my mind, but there wasn't language for that then—but if you were like, a masculine-presenting lesbian, like, folks in the factory or like, folks working wherever—like, whatever masc jobs they were working, um, would look out for each other. Um, and so that was a part of why I got that, but that was the first, like, big thing that I got. And I got in on Halloween of—I want to say the year 2000. Yeah.

Van Ness: Oh, wow, cool. Okay, so you were almost twenty—or, you were twenty.

Arce: I was just—just barely twenty, yeah.

Van Ness: Yeah, okay. Um, and so you said you also—you mentioned you moved out of your family's house. How—how old were you, and what happened there?

Arce: [chuckle] It was dramatic. I was—

Van Ness: Yes, tell me more. [laughter]

Arce: I was nineteen, um, and I had been with my first girlfriend for a couple of months, um, and my mom freaked out, because I got sick, and I just stayed there for days and days and days.

Van Ness: At your girlfriend's house.

Arce: At my girlfriend's house. Um, and she was like, you know, "Why didn't you come home? Blah blah blah, you're always staying over at her house. Are you and her lesbians?"

Van Ness: [laughter]

Arce: So, this is preceded, a couple years before, by a rumor, which was true, that I had been walking around the school holding somebody's hand—holding another girl's hand. My cousins told my mom, and I was like—

Van Ness: Rude.

Arce: Exactly!

Van Ness: Tattletales.

Arce: Tattletales. It's because we were—we were like, "the good kids," but we were also like, fucking and doing all this shit, so—you know, and the other cousins were like, "the bad kids," but they were doing the same shit. Um, but, yeah. So, you know, my mom asked me back then—when I was like, sixteen or so—if I was a lesbian, and I was like, "No," and then I was like, "Shit. I should've told her." And I was like, "You know what? The next time she asks me, I'm gonna say yes." So, the next time came three years later, when I—you know, all that stuff that I told you about—and then, um, so I said yes, and she flipped, right? Because I'm her second queer child. My eldest sister is also gay.

Van Ness: [laughter]

Arce: So—so she's just like, you know—

Van Ness: And they knew at the time.

Arce: They knew at the time, yeah.

Van Ness: Oh, that's funny.

Arce: So, my eldest sister came out when I was sixteen. So, yeah. So, she was—so, yeah. My mom just like, freaked out, and I was like, “You know what? I'm gonna—I'm gonna get a haircut. Like, gimme twenty bucks. I'll be back,” and I just didn't go back. Um, so I just kind of like, freaked out and ran straight to Bay Ridge, where my girlfriend was living at the time, and, um, just like, cried and cried and cried for like, three months. And I had no idea what like, real life was like. I was very sheltered. I was just like, “This woman makes as much as my parents make combined. Like, I'll be fine. I don't have to do anything.”

Van Ness: Your girlfriend?

Arce: My girlfriend, yeah.

Van Ness: Oh, wow. What was she doing at the time?

Arce: She was, um—she was a temp, um, but she worked—she did word processing for, um—for like, different—either lawyers or like, law firms or, um—or, like, financial houses, like Citigroup and stuff like that. So, yeah. She just—she worked nights, and they paid her a lot, and she still makes a ton of money, but that's another story. Um, but—but yeah, I was like, “Oh, I should be fine,” and then she was kind of like, “I'm not gonna give you money,” and I was like, “Why not?” So, you know, I ended up figuring out how to work. That's—that's how I—I mean, that's how I learned—I mean, I was terrible. I would like, cry because she had to go to work and I would be alone. I know! It's like, “Get a—get a life! Like, figure yourself out.”

Van Ness: [laughter] You poor baby.

Arce: Yeah, I was—I was pitiful. And, you know, we kind of like, did the job of like, raising each other, um, because she was extra, and I was extra, and we were very, very young. And we have apologized to each other for various things since—in like, the ten years or whatever since our relationship has ended. Um, and we're still friendly, so, yeah. That's—that's how I moved out, though. And then, you know—

Van Ness: What was your first job?

Arce: My first—what was my first job? My first job was, uh—I worked at Häagen-Dazs on 86th Street in Bay Ridge. Um, I gained twenty pounds.

Van Ness: [laughter] Yeah! Ice cream.

Arce: Yeah, I—it was amazing.

Van Ness: I'm like, "Let's go get ice cream now."

Arce: Yes. Let's get ice cream all the time. Yeah, it was great. I mean, it wasn't great, but I loved—I loved the ice cream. My boss was—

Van Ness: [laughter] That was great about it.

Arce: That was great about it. My bosses were incredibly anal-retentive, and they didn't like it when—they wanted me to scoop in the way that the video showed you to scoop in the begin—like, when they hired you—you know, the training VHS that's all skippy. So, they—they wanted me to scoop, uh, exactly like that—like, exactly four, six, and eight-ounce portions, because if I scooped a half-ounce more, that would cost them an extra fifty cents. So...

Van Ness: Whatever. [laughter]

Arce: So, you know—after that, what did I do? I—I took lots of different jobs. I ended—I worked for, um—I worked for a porn, uh, distributor for a while, and that was cool. That was on—it was—like, everything was weird, just because I didn't know how set boundaries I guess. So, people would like—like, for instance—like, you know, at Häagen-Dazs, when I worked there, like, people would ask me personal questions and I wouldn't be like, "That's a personal question." I'd just be like, "Uhh, you know, I guess I'm gonna answer this, but I don't feel comfortable about it," and same at the porn distributor. People were like, "Oh my god, you bought gay porn? Why would a lesbian want gay porn?" I was like, "Why would anybody want porn, you know?" or like, whatever. So like—so, yeah. I feel like that's also, like, around the time when I was exploring desire and stuff, too, which—I don't know. You asked me about something completely different.

Van Ness: No, yeah, tell me about exploring desire. What does that mean?

Arce: What does that mean? I mean, um—so, when I worked at the porn distributor, um, it also coincided with me—I was probably about 22 at the time, and it coincided with me, um—like, uh, hanging out with like, some of the TERFs—and for those folks who don't know it, TERF means—it's like, trans-exclusionary radical feminist. So, um, like—and that—and to explain that even further, that means like, largely women—cis women, non-trans women—who believe that trans women are not women, basically. So, their version of feminists—version of feminism, like, has to do with like, what they believe cis women want and need. Um, and so, uh, yeah. So, I hung out—I was like, trying to figure out like, how to be a dyke, and I was in a band with these women. Yeah. I was—I was in a band with, uh, like, some women, and I really, like—I still had that like, very young, fresh-faced, like, wet behind the ears thing of like, "Maybe if I'm, like, really friendly, like, these people will accept me and give me, like, all of the love that I need"—um, you know? And so I was like, really like, hanging out with them and wanting to be like them, and be cool like them, and all that stuff. And, um, like, some people were kinky, and some people like, were exploring like, masculinity, and that, to me, was like, amazing, because I had always like, sort of

secretly explored my masculinity and like, inched my way over toward being more masculine. Um, but I still like, tweezed my eyebrows like crazy and, you know, wore women's clothing, and stuff like that. Um, and so like, I was talking with one of the people there—like, one of the people who were in this like, one friend group—and, um, you know, we were talking about like, porn, and I was like, surprised that they also like, secretly watched gay porn, and I was just like, “Oh, you know, it's so external, and you know that they're not faking it when they have orgasms,” and all this stuff. Um, so like, you know, that was kind of like, the excuse. Um, but also, they—that person turned out to be a trans guy, so... It was—it was a weird time, too, because it was like, um—like, I was in this—I was in this play—like, I was one of the musicians in this play that was about, um—about, like, being masculine-presenting but your allegiance should be to women, so it kind of like, set my transition back, like, a couple years, because I had a lot to—a lot of thinking to do. Um, but, yeah. I guess like, my—like, my exploration of desire was like, mostly like, trying to figure out—like, it had to do with figuring out my gender and my relationship between my gender and the people who I desire. Um, in that—during that time, as well, um, I was—you know, I mentioned, like, dating women, um, but also like, it was partially out of like—and I always feel weird saying this or whatever, but this is where I was at the time—it was partially out of like, wanting to avoid dating men, because like, I was—I was always, um, like, feminized by men. And like, women—and the gay women that I dated at the time—were like, really happy to masculinize me, and I was like, “Word, this is great.” Um, and—I don't know. There's also like, a thing—just to kind of like, bring it to the present day—like, there's a thing where I don't—I currently, like, don't really date women. Um, and it—it feels very, like, heterosexual to me to date women, and one of the common threads is like, I just don't have a heterosexual sexuality. Um, so like, I recently, like, had a lovely hook-up with a woman who I'm—like, kind of have a crush on—and I was surprised by it. I was like, “How's this—how's this gonna work? Like, I'm gay, and I'm also attracted to you,” which wasn't confusing, it was just like, “We gotta go easy, because if we really push it, this isn't gonna work.” But, uh, kind of like, interacting with her and also like—interacting in bed, but also interacting, like, in general—like, I'm very aware of like, masculine being a dominant—like, masculinity being a dominance thing, so like, there's like, lots of things that I will and won't do, like, in and out of bed, to kind of like, subvert that feeling of like, heterosexuality.

Van Ness: Mhm. That makes sense.

Arce: Yeah.

Van Ness: So, um, you were saying that at the ti—that, beginning early on, you were mostly dating women. When did you start dating men or other people of other genders?

Arce: Pretty much when I started taking testosterone.

Van Ness: Oh, okay. And when was that?

Arce: Uh, that was August of 2005, um, and four—four months later, like, I had my first hook-up with a cis guy, and then—I mean, it's partially out of like—it's kind of a trope, but it's a trope because it's true, right?—that like, you get—you get really horny, like, after you start taking T.

Um, but also like, I wanted to explore my gender in that way, that I like—when I started—like, as soon as I started getting like, peach fuzz on my body, I was like, “I—I don’t—like, if somebody can enjoy this body, um, while it’s like, masculine—or masculinizing, um, whatever that means—then like, you know”—I don’t know. It was also—it was also partially, like—in the be—I keep forgetting that in the beginning, I had a problem—I kind of developed, like, a sex addiction. And I—I might’ve told you this. I don’t know. Um, but like, it was a—like, a lot of this—like, a lot of the stuff that I’m talking about, I guess—I’m like, noticing this common theme of like, wanting to be accepted really badly. Um, and so like, a big part of my sex addiction was like, wanting to be seen as a man by gay men. Um, and so like, every time, like, I fucked a gay man—or they fucked me, or whatever—it was like, “Okay, that’s validation.” And then, you know, they say something weird, you know? You know, like, “Oh my god, it’s been so long since I’ve had sex with a woman.” And it’s like, “No!”

Van Ness: Yeah, “You’ve ruined it!”

Arce: “You’ve ruined it!” 100%. So—

Van Ness: You gotta “Shhhh!”

Arce: Yeah, “Shhh! Just shush, and just shut up, and we can—I don’t care what you think.”

Van Ness: Yeah, “Just keep it in there!”

Arce: “Just keep it in your brain,” yeah. So, um, you know—so, that’s a rollercoaster ride, and always chasing that is a rollercoaster ride, and—and having that be, like, one of your sole sources of self-esteem or like, yardstick for what masculinity is or for what, like, gayness is, or for all that stuff—like, you know, that’s not healthy. So, um—so, yeah. So, that’s another thing, yeah. I forget what your question was, though.

Van Ness: Uh, I don’t know.

Arce: Okay, that’s fine.

Van Ness: Something about having sex with men.

Arce: Yeah. Oh, when did I start having sex with men, and people of other—? Yeah, 2005. And people of other genders, as well. Um, I also didn’t have very many, uh, partners up until that point. Like, I could count them on my hands. Um, and after that, it just like—there were lots more. And I—I think that’s great, you know? Um, and I think that, um—I also think that like, having sex opens up friendship, because it opens up trust and vulnerability. And, um, at a certain time, I didn’t have any friends that I hadn’t had sex with, and then, like, I think that’s great, too, um, if that works—like, if that works for you, listener, that’s great. If it doesn’t, like, cool. Um...

Van Ness: Do you.

Arce: Do you, yeah. I think that—I think that like, the vulnerability, and pleasure, and trust that come from like, having sex with friends can be great, so I'm—I'm for, like, getting your life, getting your pleasure, all that stuff.

Van Ness: That's great. Um, let's see... Other questions... Well, what—uh, ooh, how would you—so, can you tell me more about your relationships?

Arce: My relationships? Yeah.

Van Ness: Yeah. Like, I know you were dating that person at twenty—or at nineteen—and other relationships: tell me about them.

Arce: Yeah, okay. Um, I'm not monogamous, right? So, all of the sex that I was talking about having, um, was within the context of like, one primary relationship or another. Um, so that's one thing, right? And I don't—like, a lot of people describe that as poly. I don't really describe that as poly—like, polyamorous—because I think that polyamory is like, wanting to fall in love or build loving relationships with people, and the way that I'm wired, um, I can—I have a lot of energy for one main person. Um, and so like—and by a lot of energy, I mean like, most of my relationships I've had—I'm in my third, like, primary relationship. Um, my other two were seven years each.

Van Ness: Oh, wow.

Arce: Yeah. So, uh, I was in a relationship with this woman named Eva, um, for seven years from like, 19 to 26, and then I was in a relationship with someone named Jess from 26 to thirty-something—I forget—and then now, I'm in a relationship with Alex, um, and we've been in a relationship for probably like, three to four years or so?—um, and I'm hoping we can beat seven. Uh, so—um, yeah. So, my relationships have been, um, you know, really sweet, and I mentioned, like, the first one was, uh—we were kind of figuring out what it means to be adults in relationships. I was 19, she was 22, when we started dating. Um, with Jess, uh, I think we had the adult part figured out, but not the communication part. Um, so communication was a really, really big thing. Um, he was wonderful and very intuitive, but he also, you know, sometimes made a lot of assumptions, and I didn't have a way of, um, advocating for myself with those—within those assumptions. Like, I just didn't know how.

Van Ness: Gotcha.

Arce: Um, and with Alex—I mean, he's ten years younger than I am—ten years and a week younger, or—

Van Ness: [laughter] Very specific.

Arce: Yeah, very specific. Ten years and a week, to the day. But, um, he's also surprisingly adept with emotions. Like, I think about where I was at his age, and I had no clue, but I have to

remember not to compare those things, because we're very, very different people. Um, so with him, um—you know, he will remind me that like, we don't always have to want the same things, or like—you know, in other relationships where I've dated other—where I've—I'm not going to say "dated" anymore, because that's—you know, in other relationships where I've fucked other people, sometimes I would come back and my—my partner would be mad. And it's like, I told you I was gonna do this, we agreed on it, you said it was okay, I'm going to do it, and now I do it and then you're mad. And it's not like—they have every right to—of course they have every right to be mad, but it feels strange—like, we'll talk about your anger. It feels strange to focus on my actions when it's like, you know, I kind of—I played by the book, you're having feelings, let's talk about your feeling. I didn't know how to do that then, but that's not what I'm getting at right now. Um, like, Alex made a joke recently to me about, um—about like, you know, something—about having sex with somebody, um, and I was like, "Oh, that's hot." And then I was like, "Hahaha, I just had sex with somebody else," and then he didn't respond! And I was like, "Oh my god, are you okay? Was this okay? Should I, like"—and he's like—he's like, "Oh, I was just like, watching *Star Trek*. I'm sorry, like, that I didn't respond just then." But he was like—he was like, "It's okay. Like, listen. Um, like, I know that like, we don't really talk about it very much," um, just because it's not really built into our relationship to talk about it. Um, he was like, "But I know that you go out, and I know that you have a lot of sex with a lot of people, and I think that's great, and I'm glad that you're getting your life." And I was like—[sigh] that's probably like, one of the more amazing things a partner has said to me. Um, so I think that's great.

Van Ness: That's cute.

Arce: Yeah. Yes, it's very cute.

Van Ness: Let's see, what other questions—ah. It's on my belly [flipping through papers]. Okay, so, hmm... What about your relationship to other trans and gender non-conforming people? Tell me more about this.

Arce: Okay, I will tell you more about that. I love trans and gender non-conforming people! Trans and gender non-conforming people are my favorite people. Um, and I don't know if you heard that at all, but there was just a wonderful shock of thunder. Um, but yeah. I—I feel—I'm most interested in pursuing friendship and partnership, et cetera, like—like, sharing myself with trans and gender non-conforming people. Um, right now I'm in a band with—and it's a band that I've been in for like, five years—with my best friend, who is also trans, and our drummer, who is also trans, and I'm—so, that's my one, like, band that I consider my main band, but I'm also in a band—and that's a band called Trashy, um, with Al Rosenberg and Jane Henson—and I'm also in a band called Choked Up with Christy Rhode—uh, who is a wonderful, um, artist and musician—um, you should look her up, obviously. And, uh—like, you know, there's lots of, um, like, ideas of trans-ness and gender non-conformingness within that band, as well. Um, the only person that I'm gonna out is myself, though. So, um—but yeah, like lot—lots of people play with gender in different ways in that band, as well. And—and also embody different genders. Like, even femme as a gender can be a thing. Um, but yeah. I—we do—so, Al Rosenberg, who is, uh, in Trashy, um, does something called Brooklyn Transcore, which is, um—it culminates as a stage on Punk Island,

Punk Island being New York's, uh, largest, um, DIY, like, punk show, long story short. Like, there's like, a hundred bands, ten stages, all free, um, and it happens on one island or another, um, in New York. And then we have a stage—we've had a stage for the last four years—called Brooklyn Transcore, but we also, like, have always aimed to have it as like, a series of shows, as well. And it's great, because, um, we can f—we can, um, showcase, like, different trans and queer, uh, performers. Um, and also, it fosters community, which is great.

Van Ness: And, um, how did Brooklyn Transcore come about? Were you part of the inception?

Arce: Um, I was part of—I was part of the inception. Um, we—it was literally like, we saw something that wasn't there, or something that like, sort of was almost there.

Van Ness: Didn't quite have shape, or something like that?

Arce: Didn't quite have shape, yeah. Like, we weren't the only people who had used the phrase Brooklyn Transcore, um, but we wanted to make Brooklyn Transcore, like, a thing, and we literally wanted to do it to promote our band and other bands. And I don't think any of us, like, thought about, um, recognition or, um, community at the time, but like, I think that it—it's kind of a thing now, and it's great. Um, and we're—you know, I don't want to say that we're the only people who did it, or we're the first, or whatever, but I do want to say that we did a thing that people—people enjoy, and—and some people benefit from, so I think that's a great thing. Yeah.

Van Ness: Um, let's see... Doot doo doo... Uh, what does community mean to you?

Arce: I—when I think of community, I think of support and, um, like—yeah, and like, seeing folks who you know, and, um, I think of going to shows alone and just being able to say hi to lots of people that you already know, so that's my fav—that's one of my favorite ways of experiencing community. Like, feeling commonality and—and care.

Van Ness: Cool. Uh, doot doo doo... I guess, uh, how would you describe your gender?

Arce: I would describe my gender as masculine. Um, I, am—I feel like walking around in the street, um, I embody manhood, I suppose, even though saying it even feels weird. Um, but I—you know, to use a phrase—like, I live as a man. Um, and then I understand that that's a thing, um, and I feel like my gender encompasses manhood. Like, I don't feel like manhood encompasses my gender, although like, in the Venn diagram, they're like, not that far—terribly far apart. Um, so, I think of—I think of my gender as like—yeah, like, masculine, definitely. Um, I'm not somebody who's afraid of talking when I was a little—about when I was a little girl. Um, I don't think I do it that much, because for some people, it's disruptive and distracting, but I'm not like, afraid of it, and if I'm comfortable with somebody and they know my deal, like, yeah, I'll talk about it—um, and positively. Yeah.

Van Ness: Doot doot doo doo... Uh, I guess is there anything else you want to add?

Arce: I—I was just thinking about like, in—in that masculinity there’s like, this longing for like, certain femininity, and even though things aren’t, like, as binary as that, um, there are a lot of things that I wish I could do that I can’t do.

Van Ness: What?

Arce: Like, paint my nails. I can’t paint my nails.

Van Ness: Why can’t you?

Arce: I just don’t feel comfortable.

Van Ness: Oh, okay.

Arce: I have really—like, I get really uncomfortable. Uh—

Van Ness: What if you just paint one?

Arce: No, still.

Van Ness: Too much?

Arce: Too much.

Van Ness: Clear?

Arce: Clear is like, iffy, which is like—I’m like, “Come on!” Like, but it’s like—it’s like, panicky. Yeah. I don’t—well, I mean, not that it has nothing to do with gender expression or whatever, it’s like—but, I don’t like buying underwear. [chuckle] So, I get the same panic—the—it’s—oh my god, it’s dysphoria! [laughter] Oh my god. Anyway, so I get dysphoric—hello, this is therapy now. I get—I get the same kind of panic I feel buying undies that I do, um, painting my nails. Yeah.

Van Ness: Boxers or briefs? Nah, I’m just kidding [laughter].

Arce: Trunks. Trunks! Boxers today, because it’s, uh, laundry day.

Van Ness: Ah, okay [laughter].

Arce: Also, I don’t know if—if y’all—well, y’all don’t know this, but I’m—it’s a very hot July day. I biked over here and immediately—I biked to Lorenzo’s house, and immediately I was like, “Would you mind if I—if I took off my pants?” So, we’re doing this—we’re doing this interview, and I’m in my undies.

Van Ness: Yeah. We’re on the floor—

Arce: We're on the floor.

Van Ness: —in my bedroom.

Arce: Yeah, and it's very comfortable.

Van Ness: It's pretty chill.

Arce: Yeah.

Van Ness: Let's see—um, underpants, [laughter] who knew?

Arce: Who knew?

Van Ness: Um, what about—doot doo—things like, um—have you ever—do you ever feel like you've had to choose between expressing your gender identity and economic security, or social ease or acceptance, or anything?

Arce: No, um, because my—my gender identity always came first. Um, and I—I feel like I'm somebody who has always, like, made the whatever it is that I am come first. Um, so, yeah. A lot of people—like, I guess the outcome of me coming from such a conformative—uh, conservative and conforming background, um, meant that like, I always wanted to like, be as loud about whatever it is that I am as possible. So, um—so, yeah, like, when I was—I guess in—yes and no, right? Because that like—showing up as like, a young butch, right, to a job interview and giving those signals, um, means that, you know, you're probably—you're often not gonna get the job as like, a secretary, right? Um, so I guess in that way—in ways that I didn't realize were affecting me, they had been affecting me. Um, and also like, safety, you know? Like, you're not terribly safe if people are always coming up to you and asking you like, what gender you are. Um, but—but in terms of like—like, have I lost a job over it, have I lost housing, like, no. And, uh, I'll definitely be the first to admit that like, other people have it—like, it's a far more complex question for lots of other people. Yeah.

Van Ness: What about, um, your experience with like, healthcare, and like, mental health, and stuff like that? What—tell me.

Arce: I've—I've been very lucky. Um, I also—I'm kind of easy to please, so there are a lot of—there are a lot of times when like, stuff that would bother other people doesn't bother me. Um, I have had my—like, pretty much all of my transition stuff—through Callen-Lorde [Community Health Center]. Yeah, and I've—I've been satisfied with their service. Um, lots of other people go to Callen-Lorde and fucking hate it. So, um—you know, and I've been misgendered there, and I've just been like, "Hey, you guys, this nurse misgendered me," and they've been like, "Oh. Oh, that's terrible." That's all I need, personally. Um, but, yeah. I mean, mental health stuff is like, a continuing thing. I, you know, have been in therapy on and off for a long time, and I also happen

to have friends who—like, some of whom are social workers, et cetera, so like, I can confide in friend—in my like, smart, very caring, very intuitive friends. Um, you know? And, yeah. So—so, yeah, I'm most—I'm like, optimistic, and I've been very fortunate, as well, in a lot of stuff.

Van Ness: And did you start going to Callen-Lorde like, in 2005 when you started getting T and stuff?

Arce: Mhm. I started—I started going to Callen-Lorde so that I could transition.

Van Ness: Oh, okay. Nice. Cool. So, what are—is there anything that someone really needs to know if they're like—to understand Santos, you need to know X, Y, and Z?

Arce: Um, they need to understand, uh, that I'm really aware of the class gap, um, and that, um, like, it's one—it's probably one of the things that enrages me the most. Um, I was a dog walker for a really long time, and I was like—the only thing that I had in my house was like, a futon on the floor, and I would listen to my mentally ill, like, downstairs neighbor crying. Um, and then I would wake up, go to a million-dollar Park Avenue apartment, and walk their fucking dog—you know, and get treated like the help, because I was, right? Um, and there's this—I think, like, if we're talking about New York, we're talking about like, intense divergence, right? Um, we're talking about—like, I was talk—I mentioned earlier, like, you know, um—like, people, um, kind of not having anywhere—anything to do, anywhere to go, et cetera, and turning to drugs, and being like, really aware of that—um, and also like, not being a part of it. Um, and I feel like I'm somebody who's like—like, dodged a lot of bullets. Uh, and so like—yeah, I mean, that, you know—like, loving—like, really valuing like, work, and smarts, and street smarts—um, like I—I'm definitely a New Yorker in that I love to a good hustle [snaps fingers]. And if somebody hustles me, I'm—and I, you know, fall for it—and I realize it, I'm—maybe I'm mad, but I'm also like, “Damn, that was real smart.” So, yeah. Um, and I'm a softie, and I like care, and I like giving care.

Van Ness: And, um, have you always lived in New York?

Arce: Yeah.

Van Ness: Okay. Did you ever live anywhere else for any period of time? No? Okay.

Arce: No. I mean, technically I lived in—in Venezuela for like, a month when I was a kid, but I don't know if that's living there or being on vacation. That's kind of iffy, when it's a month.

Van Ness: Yeah. Where in Venezuela were you for there—for that time?

Arce: Um, I was mostly at my grandma's house in La Guaira, which is like, a little—uh, it's not a little town, but it's—it's a city that's right next to the capital—uh, Caracas, which is the capital.

Van Ness: Oh, okay. Cool.

Arce: And she also—

Van Ness: Have you been back?

Arce: No. I want to—I would love to go back. I would love to go back, but not now. Not now. I will—I, you know—people can't eat, you know? It's bad—it's really bad. Um, so, it's a—it's a beautiful country, or at least, I remember it being a beautiful country. Um, like, one of the things I think about—about my family—is like, my grandma, who was a nurse in like, the 50's—um, and she, uh—she—I got distracted because I thought of a totally different story, which I really want to tell, but I'll tell you in a minute.

Van Ness: Okay. Yeah. [giggling]

Arce: Um, so my grandma, who was a nurse in the 50's, um, she worked really hard and saved up for a beach house. Um, and it's on a little island called Margarita, right? And then the house—they don't have, um—they don't have na—they don't have numbers, they have names. So, um, her house is called *Mi Esfuerzo*, and that's—that means “my effort.” Um, so I think that that's, like—that really, like—it really, like, fortifies my heart to think about that—to think about like, the—the deep respect that folks can have for—for each other and for their own effort. Yeah.

Van Ness: So, what was that other story you wanted to tell?

Arce: The other story was, um, about the first time I ever used my given name. Did I ever tell you this story?

Van Ness: No.

Arce: Okay. Um, so I was like, 24, I want to say—and I'm thinking about like, things that people should know about me, or people should—maybe people would benefit from. So I was 24, and my first partner was a burlesque dancer, so we went to a lot of burlesque shows. And there was one—um, one show where somebody was like, unzipping their boot, and they were inviting different people from the audience—or, inviting one person from the audience to unzip it for them. And they were like, “Can't we have a volunteer?” And then I wanted to do it really badly, but I didn't. And then somebody else volunteered and did it, and then I went up and she was like, “No, no, no. The moment's passed, sweetie.” So I was like, “Alright, yeah, that's cool,” and then afterward, I go out and I smoke a cigarette, and then I hear this woman—um, who was like, you know—I just hear this like, tiny little voice or whatever, and she was like, “You should've done it. You would've been way cuter.” And I was like—I was like, “Oh, yeah?” and then she was like, “What's your name, sweetheart?” and I was like, “[inhales] It's Santos,” and she was like, “Santos, huh?” and I was like, “Yeah,” and she was like, “Santos, I should tell you about my *tio* Carmelo.” And then she—she told me about her *tio* Carmelo, right? Her *tio* Carmelo was not always her *tio* Carmelo. He was her *tia* Carmela. Um, for folks who don't speak Spanish, that's Uncle Carmelo, right, who was once her Aunt Carmela. So, she was saying that this is in Mexico, back in the day. I don't know when. I'm assuming maybe the 50's. But, uh, he had a wife, he had kids, and he had

land, right? Things that a woman did not have. But she was like, “You could not tell him that that was not his wife, those were not his kids, and that was not his land,” like, you know? And this is to somebody, A) like, what is this story? What are you telling me right now? I just, for the first time, used my real name, right? And second, um, this is coming on the heels of, “Okay, I’m trans, but I’m not—I’m like, doing this outside of things that apply to my heritage.” I’m not Mexican, but it’s, you know, pan-American thing—like, the Latin experience—I really believe that. And so, I was just like—my mind was blown, and I thought that that was like, the best—and I still think the best possible way to—for somebody to welcome you into your own name. Um, you know, and I remember that also—like, that’s another thing, like, that really fortifies my heart, so...

Van Ness: That’s cool. Good story.

Arce: Yeah, thanks.

Van Ness: Um, are there any other, like, really memorable things that you’re like, “Oh, man, this is a good time.” [laughter]

Arce: Um, man, it’s like—it’s like, I feel so—it feels a little shallow, but it’s—it feels a little shallow to say, um, but it’s also like, nice in a way. Um, like, I remember nice things that people say to me in bed. Um—no, I’m serious. I remember nice things that people say to me in bed, and I think it’s—I think it’s—it’s like, trumped-up and like, a little romantic, and you’re on a different plane, right, but it’s also like, probably some of the loveliest things that people have ever said to me, uh, and the loveliest moments. And I think that like, people should value that and cherish that, and I think people should value and cherish pleasure. Um, and I also think that it’s important to—to not, um—it’s super important to like, see that for what it is, and also to like, find your own value and like, really, really figure out what your heart wants. And that sounds corny to say, but it’s true—um, and value that, and go—go for what you need, and know that that’s gonna change. Yeah.

Van Ness: Um, let’s see... I guess, if you wanted to be remembered for one thing, what would it be?

Arce: Um, if I would get to be remembered for one thing, I suppose it would be my bass-playing. I would—I would love to be—I would love it if people—like, James Jamerson, who was the Motown bass player, right? You hear Motown, and you hear his bass-playing, and you’re like, “That’s James Jamerson.” I would love it if somebody could listen to something and be like, “That’s Santos.”

Van Ness: That’d be cool.

Arce: Yeah.

Van Ness: Do you—do you—what is your relationship with your bass? Do you have a name? What’s the story there?

Arce: Um, I don't have a name. I get a new bass every once in a while. Um, I have a particular sound that I look for, um, and I guess if people are into bass, like, I like humbuckers, and I like a very trebly sound, and I play—um, I do like, walking, uh, basslines—like, scales—and I try to play it very fast. And I think that probably what you might've noticed is that I try to give all my ideas about something, uh, when you talk to me, and I do the same on bass. So, I want to kind of say all the things as quickly as possible, in whatever format I have. Um, and so that's—that's the way that I play and, uh—and in terms of my relationships, like, it's my #1 stress relief. If I need—if I like, am angry and I need a nap, and I can't nap, like, I'll go to Guitar Center and I'll play, and I'll—it'll be like hitting the refresh button. So, yeah.

Van Ness: Sweet. So, any last—any last words that you want to include in the, uh, podcast kind of thing?

Arce: I mean, not—not really. I mean, I think that, um—I hope that, if there's anything that I want to say to like, the general public, like, please fucking respect each other—um, even people who you don't think deserve respect, even people who—especially—especially people who you don't notice: people working the register, people who you walk by on the street. Those are people that have their own individual lives, and they deserve respect. Yeah.

Van Ness: Cool. Alright, well, thank you very much.

Arce: Thank you.

Van Ness: And thanks, everyone, for listening!