

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

IMARA JONES

Interviewer: Jaime Shearn Coan

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Transcribed by Adam Zinck

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Jaime Shearn Coan: Hello, my name is Jaime Shearn Coan and I will be having a conversation with Imara Jones 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 April 16th, 2019 and this is being recorded at the Community Graduate Center. Welcome Imara!

Imara Jones: Thank you for interviewing me and for asking me to sit down and tell you whatever I'm gonna tell you. [Laughter]

Coan: Can't wait, can I start by just asking you to introduce yourself in whatever way feels resonant today?

Jones: Um Yes, my name is Imara Jones—we've covered that— [Laughter] I'm a journalist and intersectional news producer. I guess top of mind right now is my project *Trans Slash* which is a four-part docu-series on what it is like to be trans, specifically a trans person of color at a time of social backlash. We just released episode three on Friday, so just days ago. It's top of mind along with a whole series of other things. And I also have a show on Free Speech Television called *The Last Sip* which is a half-hour news program aimed at centering historically marginalized communities in the news. That is on hiatus right now. I am a fellow in residence at the New York Women's Foundation and I'm on the board of AVP [The Anti-Violence Project], and I live in Brooklyn.

Coan: Cool, what's AVP?

Jones: Oh, The Anti-Violence Project in New York City.

Coan: Thanks, sounds like you're pretty busy.

Jones: I am, but its good! It beats the alternative. It beats the alternative...

Coan: When did you come to New York?

Jones: You mean to live, or like the fir—

Coan: Either way.

Jones: The first time I came to New York I think I was like 12 or 14. I grew up in Atlanta and my Godmother, who's also my cousin, lived in Danbury Connecticut. And so her promise to me was that I could come to stay with her during the summer, and a part of that would be an excursion to New York City. We did both of those things, and so the first time I came to New York was then. I then came to New York for college. When I was eighteen, I went to Columbia and I left and then went to Washington DC for several— London and then Washington DC and then I came back to New York to "live" live in 2001... So I have a long relationship with New York City.

Coan: Do you remember your first impression? What year was it when you first visited here?

Jones: ...Do the math, the late 80's? 86' or something like that? Um... Oh my impression! Hot. Busy. Stimulating. Interesting. I liked it.

Coan: And that fueled your interest in returning to go to college here?

Jones: God how'd I— How did I come to college— Yeah it was really weird. I realized I didn't wanna go to college in the south because I lived in Atlanta—as I said—so I didn't wanna stay there. All of the colleges essentially that I applied to were all above the Mason-Dixon line. And a part of that was Columbia which I didn't even really know about except for my roommate at this program in Georgia called Governor's Honors where they take people who do well in college— I'm sorry, do well in high school and then put us all together in a college setting actually for I think about a month I think we were there for. And so my roommate at the time Ami told me about Columbia and was like, "I'm gonna apply here. Bla, bla, bla." And so then I looked into it and I was like, "Oh this place looks cool." So then I applied, and then I didn't know if I was going to come. Because when I first came, Collumbia wasn't New York. You know, it's not New York City. Really, you know? It is an ivory tower located in Manhattan, so I was like, "Oh this is weird!" And the dynamics there were totally different. But then I got locked out of the room I was staying in for my guest weekend and I actually interacted with real students. Not just the people that we were supposed to be sequestered with, which were the other people that had been invited for perspective student weekend and the adults we were supposed to interact with because that did not feel very "New York". And then, you know, got locked out and then everyone was super nice. And everyone was from all these different backgrounds and so because they found out I was a perspective student, got locked out, they ended up hanging out with me. And I was like, "Oh ok! This is more of what I'm looking for, this is what I want, and this feels like New York to me." And so I accepted and said, "This is where I'm gonna go." And the person that told me all about it ended up also being my college roommate. So that's how I got to Columbia. And then I left afterwards because I did really well, but I didn't wanna stay in New York immediately because New York at 21 is hard, right? Like yecch, you know? And everyone I know who stayed that first year or so, is rough. But no one ever tells you that regardless of your choice, the first couple years after college are rough. They are really crappy years, and you wonder why you did any of it right? I'd say 21 to 23 or 24 you're just not happy [Laughter] and no one ever tells you that. No one ever tells you at graduation "This is as good as it's get for a couple of years", you know? And I was like, "Ok, I'm gonna go to graduate school cause I'm not gonna stay in New York". So I went to London, and then I went to DC, and then I was ready to come back to New York after all of that.

Coan: When did you first connect with trans people or trans communities in New York?

Jones: ...Yeah, it's hard right? Because... Probably around my last year of college because I started to go out, like I started to really go out in New York City. You know I hadn't done that really before because I was a very serious student. I was very studious. I did well in college, and I liked being bookish, right? I was bookish and I liked being bookish, and so that's what I did. Yeah its one of the things about Columbia which is weird that everyone is actually super nerdy, but everyone

works really hard to hide it which is an interesting dynamic. Like everyone tries to be really cool, but on Friday nights they're studying. You know what I mean? [Laughter] So... Probably in terms of my gender identity, like gender for everyone is a journey right? It's just that my gender identity, because it was different, my gender journey started differently. But I always tell people all the time that, you know even if you—even as you are cis and accept the gender in which you are, figuring out what that gender means to you is a journey, right? I see that a lot in my cousins who are cis women, but they try on lots of different masks you know? They're 14 and 15 and they are just every day on Instagram they literally post a different type of picture with a different look, because they're trying to figure out what their gender is right? And we don't frame it like that, but everyone goes through that stage. Our journey, my journey, just started later. I started— I had to unravel both gender and sexual orientation so I think my— I started going out because I was like, "Oh, I'm attracted to men." So then I started to go out to clubs. And then if you go out to clubs, especially big clubs that existed in that time in the like mid to late 90's in NYC and were here pretty much until 2006 or 2007. Club culture stayed here for a while starting back in the 70's I guess, but you can still see it up until ten years ago. In those types of clubs there was at that time everyone, right? There was a mixture of different types of queer people. So my first interaction with trans people was when I started clubbing, right? And then my first sustained interaction with the trans community or anyone trans was through my friend Drea when she began to transition... Oh good lord, 2004 maybe. So, um... yes that's the answer to that question. Generally culturally in my own experience in seeing and being with, and then actually I had a friend who— another friend of mine was trans in DC, but again we also met through the club scene, right? You know, we were friends; and then when I came back to New York again. It's interesting that the entry point was through socializing and through finding community space in clubs and bars. But as I've learned more and researched the history of queer communities, that's the way it's been for hundreds of years. That's the way it starts.

Coan: I guess when did things shift in terms of finding or connecting with the trans community in different contexts, or were there kind of discreet areas of your life that you were kind of negotiating?

Jones: Yeah, I think that that's right. I think there were areas of my life that I was negotiating. I think, like I said, I've had trans friends pretty much from the time of the late 90's I would say, right? But that was through social circles. And then it accelerated the more that I went on my own gender journey. I think it really picked up steam like four or five years ago in terms of the full range of trans community and experience, right? So activist community, artistic community, government, policy, politics, so like the mainstream kind of center of gravity; four or five years ago when I dated someone trans. And so then that was a big shift going from people who were my friends, but I didn't hang out with and we went to things with and bonded personally to being in a large community. That was it. And then spurred by my own transition within that same time period accelerated that. So I think... I mean it just tracks really the same. Like the more I moved into my own gender identity, the more I moved into the heart of community and the heart of community issues. But not all trans people do that, right? Because there are tons of— thousands— tens of thousands of trans people across the country who the goal is to live within their gender identity, sort of unmolested. There's a friend of mine who lives here and he's trans,

he's a trans man, and he was like, "I realize I increasingly identify as a heterosexual man." And so since he's made that shift in his mind, he's increasingly less and less a part of the trans community. And I think that the vast majority of trans people live their lives like that.

Coan: Yeah, there's certainly no— there doesn't have to be a correspondence between being trans and dedicating your life to the trans struggle.

Jones: That's right or being in a community with lots of other trans people!

Coan: But you have made a series of decisions that have positioned you as somewhat of a spokesperson, maybe not spokesperson is a great word, but certainly you cover trans issues in the media... Do you want to speak more about how that kind of evolved maybe out of your previous work in the media?

Jones: Yeah, it's weird I told— I was on a panel earlier this week at Mother Jones and we were talking about how that for me, because I'm studious and bookish, that I always liked studying other things, right, and depersonalizing it. And that kind of translated to my career in journalism, which occurred after I had spent time in politics and after I had spent time in corporate media for a while. And... And so you know I liked covering other— I had constantly wrote about people, even if I was one of those people, as those people. Because that's what you're supposed to do. You're supposed to have a neutral voice, you're supposed to be objective, you're supposed to do all of that stuff that you get trained to do to be a serious, rigorous, analyst and researcher, all that stuff. [inaudible] I told him that during the Trump administration I realized that I was the subject. I was the news. I could no longer talk about a whole host of issues in a way that was dispassionate because we live in a time where the government, which is supposed to protect our rights, is actively targeting us. And as a journalist we take seriously our role as guardians of rights and the Constitution by being a check on that power. But for me, I realized those things then came together in my own personal experience. And so I could no longer really— I could no longer, and I can NOT be detached, right? It's impossible. What I have to still do is I have to tell the truth. And sometimes that truth is personally beneficial and sometimes not. Or sometimes our community is gonna like it or sometimes it isn't. We were just talking about an article that I'm working on where a lot of trans men recently celebrated the decision by Morehouse College in Atlanta to admit trans men, but it comes at the expense of trans women. I have to tell that truth, right? I still have to tell the truth, but I can't be detached anymore. And so I think I have felt, to come back to the origin of your question, I'm rather more compelled to do it than a series of like, "I'm going to go out and do this". I feel like I have to do this because it is news, and then I'm a part of the community so I'm the news as well. I'm part of the news, and not that many people who are trans have microphones... you know? And... that's not good, because the less people know us I think the more it exposes us more to harm. Because it exposes the idea of who we are to manipulation by people who do actually wanna do us harm, and they're able to manipulate the ignorance on the part of other people like through bathroom bills, like these people wanna come to be able to manipulate that ignorance. And so if we have microphones we have to tell people who we are. And we have to be really conscious about fighting ignorance and because I really do believe that we as trans people hold a lot of the keys to the future in terms of the way

in which we have to think about society and individuals and gender and fluidity. Like I really do believe we kind of are the way forward and so we have to talk and we have to tell our stories and we have to be— or rather I feel the need to be, as a result, visible. So it's as much a product of the time than anything I think.

Coan: Can you recall a specific shift that you experienced? I mean you mentioned the Trump administration is certainly—... Yeah I guess like a point at which you learned something new or saw a different way to create media that kind of integrated your personal experience and the issues you're currently facing.

Jones: Yeah I think that started... Actually, when I started doing journalism. So I started writing a column initially for Color Lines that then changed into more articles for the Nation and Mike and other places. I think I have an interest in all forms of progressive justice, and it's what I really care about. It's kind of the thing that I am most animated by, and it comes from my values from the type of society that I want to see and that I want to help build. I think from the beginning I've been lucky in that I've been able to create and write the type of work that I wanted because it was what I cared about, right? I never had to like cover Broadway or something or you know get assigned— Some people are journalists just as journalists, so they'd move around to different beats. They'll be like the Tovia [Smith] correspondent, and then they'll go cover Wallstreet, and then they'll go be the bureau chief in Atlanta and cover, you know— I'm not terribly interested in that. I'm interested in covering the things that I think matter and are underreported from a progressive standpoint that allows us to live in a society that works for everybody, by and for main people. So I think that's what drives me and that's— From the beginning, I've been able to do that.

Coan: I'm curious about... I feel like most social justice-oriented journalism is not as fiscally rewarded or supported. I'm curious about your experience around that.

Jones: Oh it's a disaster! I mean I'm not even going to pretend, it's a disaster... Yeah, there were so many times that I felt like, "Why am I doing this? This doesn't make any sense. I need to just be smart and go get a damn job somewhere, making real money, taking care of myself, and not worrying about anything else. But so far, I've proved too stubborn. And the way that I've done it is I've somehow been able to cobble together enough support from foundations to be able to do the work that I'm doing. We'll see, but that's kind of been my way is to get individual support so I can do the work that I do. But there's no infrastructure for us, and that's why the news looks like the way it does. It's the way, why we don't have as much societal change because we don't have enough new and different stories that are really provoking people to think differently. We're not providing enough examples about different ways that we can do stuff. We're not telling enough different stories, so we got the same society. And so the fact that we're under rewarded is a massive barrier to social change. This is kind of one of my evangelical sort of comments and stances that I talk about all the time, but I think it's really key and I just don't understand why people don't get that? I don't, I just literally don't— I don't. Why you think that the New York times is gonna rescue you I don't understand. You know, why we believe that cable news is gonna be the answer to everything. If we could just— If Fox went away and we just had CNN and MSNBC

do we really think that society would be radically different? Do you understand what I mean? Like imagine it, those stale-ass perspectives and mainstream voices? So, I am super happy that I've been able to do it for as long as I've been able to do it. I really hope that I'm able to continue to do that, because I think that it's important. One of the things that I'm really obsessed with is trying to find a way to build an infostructure so that more people can do it. Because even if I can do it for, you know, the next 40 years it doesn't matter because it's just me. You can't be— change doesn't come with one person; it comes with an ecosystem of building resonant support. I don't believe in one person changing everything. I think one person helps to change— helps others to change everything, right? That's the way that it has to happen, but it's not rewarded. And it's particularly brutal in this town because this is the capital of media, of global media in New York. Every media company in the world is here, quite literally. And those people are pretty well rewarded, and then everyone else who wants to do anything different are not and... Yeah that's not fun, but I keep plugging away because I believe that what I do is necessary and I do believe that there's a way to do it; And to make it work; And to have more people do the same. One example I use for *The Last Sip* all the time is that when I went to foundations— also New York is the capital of foundations. When I went to foundations like Passing the Happening like, "Please give me some money so I can make this little show." When I first went everyone was like, "Well we don't really understand why we need different types of media because we have a black president and we're about to have the first woman president ever." No one ever says that to me anymore. I don't get that at all. I think that there are these kind of "cracks". They need to be more, but there are cracks in the change where people have the notion that maybe we need to experiment and do things differently. But I think it's really important. It's really important for a trans person to be doing this work. It's vital. It's really vital and I guess I'm saying that because the more I do it the more I learn that. When *Trans Slash* came out last week, I went to a birthday party of another trans person, Devon Norrel who knows? And there were a bunch of people who showed up you know, trans, gender nonconforming, a lot of them I didn't know. But just over the weekend they had seen it. Somehow people were like, "My friend sent me your video" or whatever and people spoke about how healing it was. They sent it to other family members so they could understand their experience. One person who was in *Trans Slash* was there as well and she said that her aunts and other people in her family had called her to apologize for the way in which they treated her, because this last episode was on family and the way that families accept or don't accept their trans members. I realized that people are hungry for images that match the reality of their lives, and so it's kind of important.

Coan: Can you speak about the genesis of that project?

Jones: Yes, this goes to a lot of the things that we've spoken about so far, so it's an interesting way to build. I'd gotten the money to do *The Last Sip*; we did *The Last Sip* for 8 weeks. It was only meant to be a pilot to show what we could do. We definitely built a totally different news audience. The average person that watches cable news is 60... is 62 and they are a white man. Our audience was... We had a hundred thousand views and downloads over 8 weeks. We didn't have any marketing budget or anything, it was all through word of mouth. Two-thirds of our audience was between the ages of 18 and 35, and half were women and people of color. It was just totally different. So it was like you can build something. It was an example that you can build

something differently if you structure it differently. In the end, we had a tiny bit of money left. And it wasn't enough to do a show, but we could do something else. The four people that worked—that were the core team of the show, we had one of our last calls. I was like, "What should we do?" And I had all these ideas, they had nothing to do with me. I was like, "Let's go follow Stacey Abrams around Georgia, let's go you know— Do we have enough money to go to the border to report on trans women being separated?" The answer to that was no. I was— I had all these different ideas and someone said, "You should do a project about being black and trans and transitioning right now." And then I was like "Have you gone to YouTube? Everyone does that and no one's gonna care." Right? That's literally what I said. I was like, "No one's gonna care about that." But I said, "Ok we have one more meeting so everyone think about it! And then let's think about what their ideas are." So we did our last cong [congregation], and then I said, "Ok, what do people got? You know, what do you got in your ideas?" And then they were like, " We think we oughta do your story." I went around and I was like, "Ok, I'm gonna vote on it. Let's vote on it." And I was outvoted.

Coan: You voted against it?

Jones: I did, and I was outvoted. And it's so strange because in so many ways you're taught as a trans person and especially as a trans person of color, but I think all trans people; that somehow that your voice doesn't matter. That your story isn't interesting. No one's gonna care. You know, all this stuff and it's because we condition ourselves to hide...throughout our lives. And so if you hide enough and if you hide your voice or you can't express your voice, on some level you interpret that in a subconscious way to think that your voice isn't important...right? And I felt that my voice was only important to the degree that I used it to amplify other people, but not that my voice for myself was important. I was like, "Ok we'll do it." Because a part of also being smart sometimes is being smart enough to know when you gotta listen to other people, right? Like you have to go, "Ok, lemme listen to these people because they might actually know something." So we started and there was no plan for where we are right now. This is all making it up as we went along, but as the project has gone on over the last year the need for the project has only become more apparent. Because I think we put out the second episode not long after the leak from the New York Times about the memo that is pending— It still is pending. Everyone thinks that it's gone away, but I spoke to someone that I know in DC about the anti-trans memo where they wanna exclude trans people from the Civil Rights Act of 1965, to remove all government protections. I spoke to someone... yeah a couple of months ago and I was like, "Is this thing dead?" and they were like, "No, this thing isn't dead. They're just looking for the right moment to drop it. They've got too much other stuff going on with immigration and stuff, and they can't fight everything. And so they're just holding it for the moment that they can drop it." We released the second episode around the time that came out and I was like, "Oh my god this is really important! Like we have to do this!" I guess the project has taught me as I've gone along that my voice is important, that I'm important, that our stories are important, and they have to be told. That they're vital for our survival. Because I was also on a panel at the National Women's Studies Association and there was a Black Trans Futures panel. Who would've thought that there'd be a radical panel, but I went and I found that that they're all like radical. The whole conference totally is that way, so go to the New York Women's Studies Association conferences if you can! One of

the things that came up that people began to be really stumped about black trans futures is that they were like, “Well, because the only stories that we hear, mostly about black trans women, are about death, we don’t actually know what the future looks like.” And then I was like, “Oh, shit! We have to change that!” In order to live we have to imagine a future... you know? I even had to tell people this weekend they were all like, “I’m so tired of... You know every day I wake up I’m grateful for it, I’m always afraid every day, bla bla bla.” And I just looked at that group I was talking to and I was like, “We’re gonna have a future! We have to think we’re gonna have a future in order to have a future. And legitimizing our voices, our experiences, our lives, is really essential to that.”

Coan: ...Yeah, it makes me think about the importance of having trans people representing trans people, and also thinking about trans audiences. Which I don’t think is often the top of peoples concerns.

Jones: That’s right! That’s exactly right... I mean it’s so ironic right now because we live in an age where trans is so monetized, all of a sudden monetized! The whole thing is if you are a brand and you wanna be cool, then you need to have a trans person. Walk down the runway, sell your stuff, have a television show, trans is... monetized. But monetized in such a way is one: It doesn’t really do anything about affirming our humanity and making sure that we have a society where we have full rights, because we don’t have that yet; And secondly, the benefits of that accrue to massive corporations from which trans people are largely excluded from employment for a whole host of reasons! You know, its like the exotification is divorced from our reality and as long as it can be modified that people are ok with that. While at the same time I know visibility is important, so it is important for trans people to see themselves in a commercial or on a runway or whatever. But the thing is that we have to create a world and create images where trans people can see THEMSELVES on the runway. Do you understand what I mean? Not JUST a trans person, because that still makes it seem like it’s a thing— it’s still too out of your grasp. We have to show trans people be regular as fuck, so that then regular-ass trans people can be like, “I can have a regular life.” ...You know I tell people I love *Pose*. I’ve loved it from the beginning, I love everybody on it, I was lucky enough to meet the cast once. I love them! They’re really special people. If you’ve met— In New York you can come across famous people all the time, like on the subway or whatever. I saw Kevin Bacon on the subway once with his kids. So celebrity isn’t necessarily something that’s as enthralling for New Yorkers because it’s around, but when I met them they were special people. They literally are special people and I was like, “Ok no there’s something different about this entire cast.” But at the same time, you know trans— I’m sorry, um... *Pose* still takes place out of our current space and time. It takes place, it’s still not now, we have to go forty years ago or thirty years— No not forty it’s in the 90’s now, so like thirty years ago, twenty-something years ago? Along side of things like *Pose* we also need to be telling stories about people right now... It’s so funny— Can I just go on a riff? It’s hilarious to me on things like *Pose* where we were talking a little bit before about club culture, and how it was really important for me as my first exposure to trans people and all the rest of it. How there are large parts of that culture that even *Pose* can’t replicate. So the pier; there are no piers in New York that still look like The Pier. I went on that pier, and I met people on that pier, I had sex on that pier. I shouldn’t say that, but this is oral history, so we have to be truthful. I had sex on that pier. It was massive,

it was a massive pier with asphalt going down the sides and front, and then it had this concrete and metal barrier going down the middle, right? And there are all these things, but the piers in New York have all been absorbed by the city in order to gentrify the waterfront to make it more appealing for developers. And so even a television show like *Pose* can't actually replicate what it looked and felt like at that time, because it's been so re-mapped by capitalism and so many parts of that history have been erased. That's a huge part of that show as well is the exclusion of trans people from the history, and so trans spaces can't even be maintained. I mean, you know, honestly that pier oughta be— Should have been rather a historic landmark. They shouldn't have been able to do anything! They should have just been able to gentrify all the other piers because it's not like there's any shortage of them and leave that one intact, Alone. But it wasn't seen as valuable and it's not seen as valuable. Trans kids aren't still seen as valuable. The experience of young trans people in New York ironically is not that different from the show and in some ways might be worse because the places and spaces are even smaller and fewer... Ballroom was also important for me. I talked about club culture, but I also didn't talk about balls. Seeing balls and all the rest of it how that was also important for me as well. Because it was that first opening of fresh air and the ability to be able to see things differently. Yeah that just tapped a whole vein in my memory and in my experience, because with *Pose*— Well no, my experience is not part of *Pose*. My experience comes right after even after this season in the early 90's, so my experience would start probably 5 years later. But there was enough of that where I know, or I had some inkling or experience with it. Just thinking about the parallels between here and now and young trans kids actually fought to maintain their presence on the pier. I'm talking about, this was like 2007 or 2008 and were deliberately pushed out. During this time, there were still spaces...

Coan: Yeah I feel that show sparks so many things, but yeah your point to it not representing or there being a lack of representation of the present and also possible futures...

Jones: Right, ok so another thing— lemme just riff on. I love sci-fi! I love sci-fi, fantasy, and all the rest of it. You name it, I'm really into it. There are no trans characters on *Game of Thrones*... why not? There were trans people in medieval times... and it's a medieval fantasy so even if there weren't you can fantasize about it! That's why the word exists. *Star Trek*! The new *Star Trek*, I love. The new *Star Trek* has EVERYONE! I even was really happy to see a disabled character in *Star Trek*. There are no trans— So there are no trans people in the future? There are none? We don't— LITERALLY we don't exist in the future? In the new *Star Trek*, I'm talking about the one that was started in 2017 like mad— No, last year 2018! We're talking terribly terribly recent! Yeah, same thing with *Star Wars*. There are no trans people in the future, we don't tell trans stories in the present, it's no wonder that young trans people and trans people overall struggle with imagining ourselves as a part of having a future. And that means that we don't have full participation.

Coan: ...That makes me think about inter-generational friendships and collaborations to that... Yeah, sometimes younger trans, non-binary people don't necessarily have older people in their lives they can look to or model themselves after.

Jones: Mhm! You know, I think that that's one of the really important things about the uncovering through the work of Tourmaline and her work on Marsha Clark; *Happy Birthday, Marsha*, and then subsequently whatever the relationship is the ultimate film done by David French of who killed Marsha P. Johnson. Because for me, both of those— hearing those two trans women who changed world history be able to speak for themselves and to hear their experiences gave me so much context in my own life. The same is true for Miss Major, so I've never met but I've seen her talk. I've seen their ability to talk. And honestly a Sylvia Rivera clip is one of the things that sparked a huge notion behind the latest episode of *Trans Slash*, because we talk about the three different types of families. Blood families, kinship ties, and then chosen families; and then the way in which those interact for trans people. And especially how when our blood families fail, that we have kinship and we create chosen families and that that chosen family becomes the basis for activism, right? What actually helped to drive Stonewall that day was the relationship that Marsha and Sylvia had. And just to hear Sylvia talk about... you know this one clip— I was trying to find it outside, because I asked Tourmaline I was like, "Do you know where I can find this?" And I think only David French has the ability to use it so I couldn't include it in my work, but— Where Sylvia talks about how... whenever she would go into depression and feel suicidal, the only person who knew when that was gonna happen was Marsha. And the only person that she would open the door for when she was in that state was Marsha. Right, so in that chosen family that can ship that accountability that they had to each other, Marsha helped keep Sylvia alive. And that's a huge reason why we have... why there was any change in gay rights or anything on trans rights at all is because of that relationship that was built on this thing. And you know, to see all of the old clips of Sylvia talking about and Sylvia being booed at the first gay rights march. The thing she helped to create, the crowd literally turned on her. I think it helps gives context of, for me, that as trans people; as trans people in New York; as a trans woman of color that we do have history and that we have to assert that history. And that that history gives us strength and that part of the reasons why we continue to be marginalized is because we were pushed out, so we can't be pushed out right? Imagine if gay rights, it would've been hard, but had kept trans rights in the mix instead of hijacking the whole thing and using it as a vehicle to advance THEIR rights while leaving everybody else behind, it would've been radically different... And so that inter-gen— Even though they're not still present that the inter-generational dialogue I think is essential, and then to the extent that there are people alive that are in dialogue with older trans and gender-nonconforming people; that is also essential...

Coan: As a media maker, do you— I guess you were talking about visibility in terms of, maybe more in terms of hyper-visibility. A kind of like superficial like, "Hey, got my trans person." And the relationship to monetizing that vs. maybe a more true or holistic visibility that is self-represented or actually relating life experiences... I don't really know where I'm going with this [Laughter], but yeah I guess in your own work... how do you strategize around creating work that is different than what we're seeing in TV or on runways?

Jones: Yeah, I think that all my work so far just comes from a set of values where I believe in inclusion. One of the things I told my team is I said, "Ok, well if I do *Trans Slash* the way I'm gonna do it is I'm not gonna do it to only tell my story. I'm gonna use it to tell the stories of other trans people, so I'm gonna use me as a vehicle and as a tour guide into this larger thing." And so that's

the way we did it. You know, that's the way that we do it and every episode folds out like that. It starts with me doing something, me being like wheeled into surgery or something, and then we use it to keep widening the lens right? On other people or the experiences, the broader community, where the country is. We use it to open up. I think that comes from my values and I think I try to stick with that. That we have to be as inclusive as possible and we have to tell stories that are grounded as possible. We have to do so in a way that really encourages democracy in a way. I don't have um... Some people, the way that they... use notoriety is to brand themselves as a singular thing and that's it. They brand themselves as themselves and then people buy that thing, right? And I think I am trying— I mean I don't have the option right now cause I don't— no one's— I don't have like— no one's asking me really to do shit, but I think my idea is... not to try to become a commodity, but to become... like a door-opener.

Coan: ... I mean I think that yeah, the idea of using a personal story as a vehicle feels very connected to black feminist thought in general right? And just, I think of Audre Lorde and Saidiya Hartman's talking about like, "I'm referring to my own story as a way to open up" vs. "I think I'm really important or singular" which is a very white western concept of like, "I'm just me." [Laughter]

Jones: Right, and then the ultimate goal of "becoming me" is to become a commodity that can be bought and sold and monetized in the marketplace. You know, that's why it gets— it's because it ultimately has to be reductive. You can't be you, you only have to be you if you're gonna be moved around like a product... Do you know what I mean? If they're gonna be... this is really bad, but a lot of people just get turned into products... um... yeah, and you know I... I wanna make enough money to be able to the work that I wanna do and to help other people do that, but the goal isn't to become raised above so that I can be sold.

Coan: ... Yeah and its— I mean with, you mentioned before, the... the lurking Trump memo or whatever about trans people, and it does seem also like you're really looking at the big picture and not just like, "Oh trans people are like really in right now!" [Laughter] You know, it's like yeah there's— it's yeah... it's not all glitter. [Laughter]

Jones: No, it's not all glitter. And those companies though walk somewhat— I mean I wouldn't be really powerful if they were, if the company was like, "Ok we're gonna have all trans models, and then we're gonna start a trans internship program for young trans people who wanna do fashion." Like that's actually changing something you know like, "And we're gonna pay them, and we're gonna teach them." ... That's different, that's shifting. Representation is only commodification, but I mean there are a lot of you know, people who are becoming— Actually, it's interesting. Indya Moore, who's one of the stars of *Pose*, she actively talks about the struggle, right? Like, "How I'm being sold as this beauty standard of womanhood overall," but she has to deal with Louis Vuitton and all this other type of stuff and she— but she's also like, "But in some ways I don't identify as a woman. I identify as gender nonconforming. And that's not what people want from me because they wanna be able to say look at this beautiful trans woman who has a universal standard of looks and we should all—" And that how there's this inherent— [inaudible] There's an inherent tension.

Coan: ...I keep returning to my mind to the comment you made about the link between a kind of social support system and political work or political action or activism... and I'm not sure I feel like there's more there that I would love to unpack... Like how did you experientially come to understand that?

Jones: Hmm... It was from my time in politics and in corporate media so I went from [intermittently bangs on the table softly] the last two years of the Clinton White House, and then I went to go work for Viacom. I shouldn't bang on the table because this is an audio project... And so... One of the things that you learn is that you learn how— from those experiences I learned lemme just say. I learned... That in order for either people or ideas or products to sell through, you have to create an entire ecosystem which will create enough noise and attention for those things to break through. It's true about a candidate; it's true about an idea; it's true about products, you know? I remember there was gonna be that special release of *The Godfather* and also a new *Spongebob*. These two things. At Viacom, we were relentless about... using everything that we had and deploying everyone that we had with the same message in different ways to get people to understand that this was the new date for the *Rugrats* movie, period. And I mean months. I mean hundreds of people. I mean in the many tens of millions of dollars... and it was all focused to get this one notion out. So if that has to happen for a movie; [Laughter] If that has to happen for a candidate— That's what happens with candidates right? They create these ecosystems that allow themselves to break through that include policy people. It includes messaging people. It includes fundraising people. It includes contacting the press. It includes working with the corporate community. It includes people in non-profits. They create an entire thing around them that at the right moment pushes them to break through and to move out into public consciousness, right? And I saw it work... time and time again, and so then I think I learned from that and absorbed from that if we want to do the same thing for people who are historically marginalized; for our ideas; for a better world, we have to find a way to do the same thing. It's gonna be in a different way cause we don't have that "thing", but its finding a way about creating these ecosystems of interlocking alliances and responsibilities and agendas that are able to push things. That's what we have to really figure out, and a huge part of that is communication. And it's so weird, cause progressive people a lot of times don't really know a lot about communications; don't think that it's important; scoff at media; scoff at the press or whatever. And I'm like, "If the only people who know or care about what you're doing are in this room, that's a problem." And some people get off on being the... marginalized— What is—What do they call them? ... Get off on being sort of marginali— Get off on the idea of being... in the know, but marginalized like, "We have this secret for the change of society and only us can bring that about and we can't really do the other stuff that other people do to change because that's somehow tainted." It's interesting because it's actually Marxist. It's actually a Marxist ideology. It come's out of Marxism and so to the extent that Marxism has influence that part of... organizing. It's a problem, because we have to reach people and we gotta reach a lot of people, and we gotta reach people in their hearts and minds. And the thing about most people is that they don't really think about anything until you tell them, so most people in this country haven't thought about trans issues and they don't know what they think about trans issues. They literally don't. There's us, and then there are people on the other side who are obsessed. They thought a lot about us

and they have an idea to get rid of us. Everybody else is just kind of trying to listen and figure it out and super confused. What we have to do is to figure out how to talk to other people in a way that resonates about who we are; what are stories are; what we want out of life; so that we can build a world in which we can fit in. That's essential, and that means figuring out how to stitch together these larger frameworks in which we can create and amplify the essential message of our humanity... Do you have one more question? There's usually— sometimes if people have one more question.

Coan: I mean if you wanna bring anything else in. It's 2:30.

Jones: Yeah, I'll say one other quick thing. I'm really lucky to live in New York City as a trans person. As ter— as not terrible, but as TOUGH with the 'T' word, as this place can be to figure out how you're gonna do what you're gonna do, because it's been essential to trans history. Cities and places, just like people have memories, and because trans people have been here for such a long time there's a memory of us. There are places and space for us, and that's super important. It's not enough, it needs to be more, but I'm really fortunate to live here and to be in that and I recognize that. And recognize that New York is special. I think what I want is to make sure that there's a special place for trans people in Jackson, Missisipi; and Butte, Montana; and you know... Feira de Santana in Brazil. I want it to be everywhere. I want there to be space for us everywhere!

Coan: Thank you so much for your words.

Jones: Oh, thank you so much for listening and for asking. [inaudible] I really appreciate it.