

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

NICO FUENTES

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Transcribed by Sam Pendergast

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien and I will be having a conversation with Nico Fuentes 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 February 11, 2018, and this is being recorded at the NYU [New York University] Department of Sociology. Hello.

Nico Fuentes: Hello.

O'Brien: How are you doing tonight?

Fuentes: I am tired from work, a little bit damp because the weather's been terrible. But for all intents and purposes I'm well.

O'Brien: Excellent, excellent. You mentioned you had an action yesterday. What was that?

Fuentes: Yeah! Direct action gets the goods. So we strategized on, we've been strategizing on—

O'Brien: Who's we?

Fuentes: Ah me and my co-workers and the RWDSU [Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union] who is who we voted in as our union representatives.

O'Brien: Where do you work?

Fuentes: I work at The Pleasure Chest in the Upper East Side. The Pleasure Chest is a sex shop. It's one of the oldest in New York. It started in 1971. And last year we voted for union representation. We unanimously voted for union representation, which is a key thing about our campaign that's a little bit special. Yeah, so we have been in the struggle for a fair contract. Yesterday on the 10<sup>th</sup> we had a tabling event outside of both stores. Staff that wasn't scheduled that day showed up to both locations. We had some solidarity from another union. And we handed out valentines to the public and asked them to engage in sending the workers valentines. So it's a two part—it was a launch of an online campaign for people to get in touch with the workers, to send us valentines. You know, things that workers at The Pleasure Chest like to hear is, you deserve fair wages, you deserve minimum staffing on the sales floor. You deserve safety training, de-escalation trainings, privilege and boundaries trainings, which are key things that we've been asking for about a year now in the contract negotiations. Our employer, Brian Robinson, who owns the company, has this far been—is playing very hard to get, if you will. Putting it very, very nicely. He decided to lawyer up with Jackson Lewis, which is one of the US's largest, meanest, most notorious law firms—and most expensive—which is actually just a testament to how powerful it is, the power that we hold collectively at The Pleasure Chest.

O'Brien: Wow, I'm going to back up and ask you a lot of questions about how you got to this point, but I really want to hear a lot more about that campaign and your organising there.

Fuentes: Sure.

O'Brien: So where did you grow up?

Fuentes: So I'm originally from West Texas. I'm from a small town called Pecos Texas. It's in the Permian Basin near Big Bend. That's where my family has always been from. And when I was younger, um, we moved to Houston, which was how, kind of, my immediate family—my parents and my sisters—how we kind of got exposure to middle-class aspiring life for a Mexican family. So I spent a lot of time in Houston, in North Houston. All my summers in West Texas with my grandmother and my very large family, and then I lived a little bit in Austin, for college and also I lived a little bit in Oklahoma, for high school.

O'Brien: How old were you when you moved to Houston?

Fuentes: I, oh I was really young. I was about three. And we initially moved actually to Laredo Texas, right on the border, and spent some time there. And when I was five we moved to Houston. And I was there up until I was 15. I'm 27 now. Um in which we, me and my dad relocated to Oklahoma. I went to Oklahoma State University for a while, dropped out of there, wasn't feeling it. It was a really toxic place for me. And then I found myself in Austin, around turning 21. Spent time there and then made my way to New York when I was like, 23.

O'Brien: What are some early memories you have?

Fuentes: Early memories that I have would be—the dessert. Um, the dessert, yeah. The smell. The smell of what it smells like in the desert right before it rains. It's exquisite. It smells like minerals. I remember eating dirt [laughter]. The clay in West Texas tastes really good, just tastes like the way that you think the earth would taste like. Um, I remember my grandmother's kitchen, my abuela. Music, lots of music. I remember my sisters. I was really adored by them. They doted on me a lot. They're like 8 or 9 years older than I am so there's a big difference between us. They doted on me a lot. My grandfather, he's no longer alive. Being in his truck, I remember that a lot. Those are early memories.

O'Brien: So your family is Mexican?

Fuentes: Yes.

O'Brien: And has lived in West Texas...

Fuentes: West Texas

O'Brien: For a very long time.

Fuentes: Pretty much, I mean, so-called Mexican.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Fuentes: I mean, that's a really long, complicated colonial history. I mean.

O'Brien: Texas was Mexico.

Fuentes: Texas was Mexico.

O'Brien: It wasn't that long ago.

Fuentes: But Mexico is an imperial project.

O'Brien: Right, right.

Fuentes: And indigeneity exists. And I think currently in my life I'm navigating what that means. And how I relate to that, the fact that my family has always been there, and what that actually means in the context of this imperial project. But yeah, that's where—most of my family's still in West Texas. I'm very far [laughter]. I'm one of the few who's this far away.

O'Brien: I feel like West Texas is a place that a lot of New Yorkers, if they know anything about it, know about it through music.

Fuentes: Yeah! Through music. I think a lot of people know about the rodeo. My home town is billed as where the first rodeo happened. The tejano music is, like, from that area. I mean, Corpus Christi's not very far, where Selena was born. Um, and, the image of I think the tumbleweed and all of that is actually an aspect of West Texas that I think the Northeasterner would understand and think about.

O'Brien: So you went to college in Oklahoma a bit?

Fuentes: Yeah, I did. Um, it was terrible. It was such a confusing time for me. I mean I would say, being somebody that was read as, probably gender non-conforming, you know, who was very—I occupied a—I looked very confusing to people. I was constantly mis-gendered. I was actually correctly mis-gendered a lot and then people would be like, "oh, I'm sorry, you are not a woman... maybe," which led to these weird dynamics existing in that place. And Oklahoma's such a, it's such a specific history. Race there is so, the racial dynamics there are so palpable. And the way that people of colour move through space there is just so, I think of it as being sort of surreal. I do. I, it was almost a caricature of what people think of the South being. I was a freshman in college and I was chased by these rednecks in a truck, you know. This type of, like, intense, especially in the more rural parts of Oklahoma, you know. I went to Oklahoma State so that's in Stillwater, which is just a college town with not a lot. The university's the only thing that's going in there, in a sense. So, the dynamics with people who were from there, and my body, my precarity. Being legibly trans and also being legibly brown, or legibly non-white, just, um, was visceral. So I got really sick. I had a really massive depressive episode. Like went through, you

know, my first year there was just so hard. Um, I was going to school, it was this whole, I'm going to become a doctor, you know. The whole academy, academia was really like compelling to me at the time. But I ended up dropping out because I was so sick.

O'Brien: Tell me about being sick.

Fuentes: Yeah, you know I was so—that was one of the most isolating times in my life. In high school I kind of found some ways to occupy space. I went to a really conservative right wing, Christian school, which was a lot of different things. It was a really violent experience. You know, just even like my relationship even now to uniforms and dress codes is really directly related to my trauma around really enforced dress codes, and having a body that was—you know I had breasts, I was not lean and tall and white and not blue-eyed, you know. And there was only me and two other people of colour in my class. So coming from that and then going into a college experience, and going into a college experience that I didn't want, was enormously isolating, enormously isolating. And not having, never learning skills sets on how to, never being provided skill sets on how to—just the basics of being a student in a university setting. I excelled in high school but it was just, there was just this total disillusionment when I started going to school there. Um, so I started taking um sleeping pills because I was having insomnia. I was just really sick. Really, really sick. And, um, frankly very suicidal. And still even at that point didn't have language to say I'm trans. Didn't have language, didn't have language for queerness. I knew gay and lesbian. My oldest sister is a lesbian. I had language for that, but no gender variance. I guess I kind of knew vaguely of trans people. Because growing up I was exposed to or, had access to a trans woman who was a very close friend of my sister's. But it was very much, "I'm not that." Which, yeah, does a number on your [inaudible].

O'Brien: Tell me about this trans woman, who was in your life.

Fuentes: She was amazing. She is amazing! She's doing great, she's beautiful, she lives in Los Angeles. But since my sisters are older than me, they were in like middle school and high school when I was a child. My parents, um, were very liberal in the sense of accepting people into our home, but very conservative in the way that me and my sisters expressed ourselves. But my, growing up there were a lot of people always at the house. My sisters always had friends over and like, it was a very open environment for people to come to us. Um, and, one of my sister's best friends, even to this day. I mean I don't want to clock her shit but it was probably before her transition, you know, she was in high school. And one of my earliest memories of engaging with transness was, um, I was such a nosey little brat and I hated when my sisters closed the doors and locked them. We didn't have a really household dynamic like that. So I would always try and barge in. And I barged in one day when my sister was like, I guess they were getting ready for a party or something. And I barged in and my sister is like putting on clothes, and her friend is putting on breasts [laughter]. And I was—it wasn't something that shocked me, it was just a sense of, oh, you're getting ready but you're putting on breasts. I didn't have any language or concept of that. And I think she screamed and I was like, uhh, and my sister yelled at me, was like, get out, or something. I was probably like ten or something. And I just, accepted her. I know who she was,

she was a part of my life. I'm sure she saw me. I haven't talked to her in a really long time, but I'm certain that she saw me, little transsexual me. But yeah, yeah.

O'Brien: You mentioned planning to be a doctor.

Fuentes: [laughter] yeah.

O'Brien: Had your parents been to college? What kind of jobs did they do?

Fuentes: No my parents never went to college. Um, my parents aren't college educated. My mother went to a stenography school which she's really proud of and I'm really proud of her for that too.

O'Brien: It's a skill.

Fuentes: But academic opportunities in our hometown were non-existent. So, for my parents I think there was this enormous push to get us to college.

O'Brien: Right.

Fuentes: Just like that classic Mexican-American cross-story of pushing for something more. My dad—so, big business in Texas is oil—so my dad worked in [inaudible] oil or something like that in West Texas and got involved and was able to move around through the oil business.

O'Brien: Did he work in the field, or was he an office worker, or...?

Fuentes: He started off in the field, that's his whole narrative was how he—he was actually a child labourer. And then started actually delivering burritos to field workers when he was a teenager and then when he was like 18 he started working in the field. And then from there he—around when my sister, my older sister, that must have been in the late 70s, early 80s—got an office job, and kind of was pulled up by, I don't really know the details, but I assume was pulled up by some of the white men around him and kind of groomed in this way because he was like, according to my mom, was just a really sociable person, just had really good, um, just connected well with people. And he found a skill in that. And that was how, yeah, that was how we even ended up in Houston because he got his job at Enron [laughter].

O'Brien: And your mom, did she work?

Fuentes: My mom worked a little bit. So my grandmother owns a flower shop in our hometown. So my mom spent all of her time working with my grandmother. Around the time that I was born she stopped working. She worked again, she worked more, like, receptionist jobs. When my dad started worked at Enron he kind of pulled her through and she was a receptionist, an executive receptionist for a while, until Enron collapsed. Yeah.

O'Brien: Did your family make it through that alright?

Fuentes: I mean, that is a time that I don't really, I didn't really understand. They kept a lot from me. I'm assuming they must have lost so much. I mean, they lost their entire retirement, like everything. All those people did. So that was really bad. It was a really, really bad—and that's actually how we ended up moving to Oklahoma, because my dad was looking, everyone was looking for work at that time. And somebody in Oklahoma wanted him and so, yeah, that was a really, really, really bad time.

O'Brien: How did you end up leaving that region?

Fuentes: Which region?

O'Brien: Oklahoma and West Texas?

Fuentes: Um, so, I was...

O'Brien: And central Texas, you were in Austin.

Fuentes: Yeah I was in Austin for a little bit. So, when I was in Austin I was like, it was totally self-discovery, I had moved away from my family, I was expressing my gender variance and, like, really just, in my early 20s—like that phase of your life when you're in your early 20s. Like putting on make up, like wearing kaftans and just finding a sense of self. And I started getting involved in fashion, like the local fashion scene and vintage fashion scene. And I was like really, really into fashion. And this is something I still love about fashion but how just the clothes, the material, can affect your body, your attitude, just all these things. Everybody that I was around was finishing up college. All of my friends were at UT [University of Texas] for design and it was just something that, one of my mentors at the time was like, this can become a thing for you. You can be a stylist, you can go work in casting for models and stuff. And that seemed like the only thing that I could do. The language around me at the time was like, well you're "creative". You're creative. They're going to get you there. New York will understand you. Because I experienced a lot, I experienced so many enormous road blocks in employment in Texas. You know like, nobody would give me a job. The grocery stores wouldn't give me a job. The friggin ice cream store. I still remember all the friggin places that I applied to that wouldn't give me a job, which was just like literally ice cream scooper. Couldn't get a job. And so it was like everybody pushing me to like, you've gotta get out of here. That was the thing. And I felt that too. I felt like under a microscope, holding all of these different gazes actually, was what it was. I was really struggling to like, push through. And I was really struggling in my becoming.

O'Brien: And how would people read your gender at that point?

Fuentes: At that time, definitely gender non-conforming. I had shaved my head. I was wearing lipstick, earrings, kaftan. But I wasn't—I didn't even have the language to say that I was trans

until one day I was at a party and somebody asked me what my pronouns were. And it blew my mind. I was like drunk at a party in Austin and I was just like, “my pronouns? What do you mean?”

O'Brien: And what year was this?

Fuentes: Oh god. I was like, 20. I don't know, what year was that. Yeah, 2010, 2011? Um, and I was so, my mind was blown. And I'm still in contact with the person who asked me that question and it was like, I literally asked him, I was like, “what do you mean, what are my pronouns?” And he was like, well you know do you refer to she/her, he/him, they. And I was like “they?! What, no!” And it just, that just speaks to how not exposed I was to any sort of, anything trans. And then at the time Tumblr was so huge and so I got on Tumblr, this was like, 2010, and just, that's when everything opened to me. Finding people. Someone really important to me was Mark Aguhar who is, was, has passed. But they were an incredible trans artist, incredible. And they saw me and they were like, you. On the internet. And we became pen pals on the internet. They ended up taking their life but their work that they made is incredible.

O'Brien: Where were they living?

Fuentes: Chicago I believe. Um, and that really affected me. When Mark left. It really, really affected me and was a moment that I—the precarity seemed to me—I under—Things clicked about transness, when Mark left. But yeah...

O'Brien: So everyone was telling you that you have to get out, you're not getting jobs anywhere, you're starting to connect with transness.

Fuentes: So, my friend had moved to New York. A bunch of different people that I knew had graduated from UT, were like ok, they're going to move to New York to start their jobs and I was just like, oh my god, like dreaming about going to New York or like whatever. Anywhere but there. And was still just like a spiralling mess. Also still sick and, um, putting, piecing together who I was and who I am, still. And one of my friends had—we were all so excited—had got a job up at Vice. So, he worked his way up at Vice and ended up contacting me and was like, can you send a short video of you like talking about yourself to me? And he was like, it's for a casting. And I did. And I ended up getting cast in this huge AT&T campaign, which was like—it's on record as one of the most profitable online and on TV and net campaigns in history which is really kind of crazy. But essentially what happened is they cast me in it. We filmed this commercial. And then they came back for South by Southwest and then they were like, we want to pitch you, we want you to—we're going to pitch you for a show. So I was like what the, what the hell.

O'Brien: AT&T?

Fuentes: AT&T. It was for this campaign called the mobile movement or something [laughter]. And it was like—

O'Brien: I didn't see this coming.

Fuentes: Yeah. It was wild. And it was like the mobile movement and it was like following youth across the US. And it was sponsored by AT&T. And I shot it in the very Vice way that they do, which is like very new media and fresh, and gritty, and like young. And the video that they released on youtube of me got the most views. And then, yeah, and then they were like, we're going to film this pilot. It was South by Southwest. I met like all these people. Like they brought all these people who were also in the campaign to meet in Austin. We filmed this thing. It was so weird. Um and then they gave me a cheque for it and I moved to New York. Yeah. And that was, three years ago...?

O'Brien: So, can someone go watch?

Fuentes: Maybe? I don't—

O'Brien: Can we go watch you?

Fuentes: I haven't looked for it in a while. But I'm sure it has to exist online. I mean everything still exists online. I have a lot of feelings, I mean, Vice is trash. But I mean what I learned through that experience was extraction.

O'Brien: Tell us about that.

Fuentes: It was, so I get to New York and the producers contacted me and they were like, so we found out you're in New York, how's it going? And that was like, a part of my plot line I guess. And they were like, we're going to pitch another show and are you interested in working with a really big name in fashion. And I was like, ok, I was trying to find a job like, whatever. And so I go to this—they don't tell me who it is they just say this is a legendary fashion figure—and I go and I meet and it's this guy named Nicola Formichetti who used to do all of Lady Gaga's creative direction and styling. And I grew up when Lady Gaga was so huge, so I was just like, whatever. And they ended up filming a pilot for this reality TV show, they didn't tell me. So it was like a lot of emotional manipulation to try and get reactions from me. And just this really awful, awful situation that was really exploitative. Nicola ended up offering me a job afterwards, after it. And he didn't want the show to happen, I didn't want the show to happen, and it never happened. So, I dodged that bullet. But that was when I really realised how—they really pushed me to— They were saying it was a documentary but it really wasn't and they were pushing for reactions. They kept telling me, "more looks, more looks", we want you to be, and "more clothes, more clothes," and feeding me alcohol so I'd be more sensitive to things, and getting more reactions from me. Flying me to LA to film this music video. It was literally insane. It was one of the wildest experiences of my life. But, the lens from which they were doing it was so exploitative. I didn't get paid much for it either, so. That's when I was like, oh shit. New media. Fashion [laughter].

O'Brien: Yeah that certainly connects to a lot of analysis and thinking coming out of trans communities these days.

Fuentes: Yeah.

O'Brien: Thinking about all the social buzz. Like, when does it translate into actual benefits for people?

Fuentes: Yep. I mean I, so in 2000. I guess three years ago it was like, I felt like I walked into this moment where trans exploded. It was like, everybody, my peers. We were getting cast in fashion shows. We were, I was like filming this, this thing. You know, there were like trans girls on the come up in the underground arts scene and in the mainstream nightlife scene. And you know I was being featured in like Vice and i-D magazine and these things and it was such a, it was such a moment to come into New York and experience that and be a part of. But I knew, after that experience with Vice I knew, something did not sit right. And I knew that this—working in fashion I realised how trends are, and the way that people's bodies become commodified. And, um, and I had this really deep sense of, this bubble's going to pop and what's going to happen to all of us when trans stops trending. And I think that, at least in my perspective, we're seeing that now.

O'Brien: So you started working in fashion. What was that like?

Fuentes: Fashion is a trip. This is, I mean, my friends would say that, you know, I was probably, had a very much different rose-tinted view of what I thought fashion is versus what it is. It is a deeply exploitative industry. I was constantly having to work for free in order to be, to get work. And was constantly overworked on sets for hours and hours with no sort of accountability process. The level that I was working at and who I was working for, I was exposed to a lot of really intense class dynamics. You know, we're talking about people like Nicola, who are millionaires, have millions of dollars and disposable income. Yet you're sitting there struggling to buy your coffee or whatever, running around getting somebody coffee, or lifting 20 pound bags of garments that cost thousands of dollars and you're like, how am I struggling to get paid? Or just seeing the ways that models are treated or just the way peoples bodies are exploited. I was so crestfallen by that. What I thought was going to be fashion was intelligence. I thought there was going to be critical thought. I thought that there would be all these things that I saw that are few and far between within the industry. It's all class. It's all class. And you, it's a material sense of class when you walk into a room and your shoes aren't the right season, or you are at Conde Nast and an editor is like, can you clean up this plate from my table and you're like, ok, I, I guess I'm cleaning up your food. But yeah that was a visceral way that I came to understand my position in New York.

O'Brien: Having conversations with people about my research in apparel there are so many queer and trans people coming to New York to work in apparel, to work in fashion. Getting exploited in a variety of ways in their experience in fashion. Yet, you know, you're turning towards it and finding unstable, exploited niches in it. Broadly, tell us a little bit about trans people in fashion in New York.

Fuentes: Trans people are still, I think pushing to—representation, visibility, and there's still. I've met a lot of girls recently who have moved to the city and are like, I'm here to be a model. Um

because there was such an intense moment two or three years ago where girls were just getting cast left and right. And I've seen how, like, neoliberal advertising has become, you know. Gender has become a part of people's everyday dealings in that they think they haven't engaged with. So we're talking about brands that are like, they're casting a boy wearing a dress, a cis man wearing a dress and they're like, that's the way that they grapple with gender or whatever. Um, but I think that what it has to do with is a drive to be seen, community-wise. Because our resources are so limited, our media representation is limited. And, New York seems to be a place where that's like, the narrative about it in terms of people who come here for fashion. It's like where you go to be noticed, to be discovered. These words that are like, to me now deeply problematic. But that's what I would say. It's a yearning to be seen. Yeah.

O'Brien: How did you end up working at Babeland?

Fuentes: So, I was not getting work in fashion. Paid work at least. And I was like, shit, I have to pay rent. So I, um, responded to an ad in a Facebook group. It was like a queer workers—I don't even think it was called queer workers, I don't know. It was like a queer employment thing...

O'Brien: Was it queer employment?

Fuentes: It may be the same one, yeah. And someone posted that Babeland was hiring and I was still trying to find jobs in New York and finding it very, very hard, you know. And my bubble was burst by that. I was like, wait, I was promised that they would get me here but they actually don't. Um, and it wasn't much different, finding a job wasn't much different than it was in Texas. And so they called me for an interview and I um went and, um, I got the job. I didn't know anything. I didn't know how to turn on a vibrator. I'd never used a vibrator.

O'Brien: How did you get the job? Do you know?

Fuentes: [laughter] I think I had a really good interview! I've been told that I'm really good at talking to people and I—

O'Brien: Clearly.

Fuentes: And I have communication skills, some. So I think that I was able to—I was really earnest, too. I was like, I don't know anything about sex and sexuality but this could be really good for me, was something I think I said in the job interview—I said I actually want to learn this stuff too. And I remember being in the interview and the two managers looking at each other and like smiling and they hired me and I started working at the lower east side location. And I did that and then I also was doing fashion...

O'Brien: Why do you think Babeland and the Lower East Side location in particular hired so many trans people?

Fuentes: That's a good question.

O'Brien: I mean, all the businesses around them are not hiring trans people right?

Fuentes: No, that's a good question. I don't know where it came from. I mean in hindsight I had no idea what Babeland was. I had actually never heard of Babeland, to be really honest. I had no idea who it was. But, I mean, the two managers at the time were cis women, cis queer women. Um, and, I really couldn't tell you why. I would say that maybe in hindsight there was people around that were pushing for that. That's where I met my really good friend Lena, who is one of my dearest friends, nearest and dearest friends. It's where I met Phoenix, who's another near dear friend of mine. I would say that they are two people who put a lot of energy into transforming Babeland, and were probably part of the voices there that were asking to change the way that it was, from before.

O'Brien: We have an interview with Phoenix in the Trans Oral History Project.

Fuentes: Amazing.

O'Brien: So what year was it that you got the job at Babeland?

Fuentes: Oh god. Oh man, so, 2014? 2015? 2014.

O'Brien: 2014?

Fuentes: Yeah. I think so, yeah. Because I was still doing fashion and I was still, I was working part time at Babeland, doing fashion and, yeah, I think 2014.

O'Brien: And what was it like working there?

Fuentes: It was a trip. I learned so much. I learned so much about myself, I learned so much about my—it was my sexual awakening. It was at a time when my gender was emerging, my gender expression was emerging. I understood myself to be trans. I started transitioning while I was working there. It really propelled me and I met so many people that were just on top of their shit and like knew their shit and embodied their stuff. And people who saw me, and people who still see me. I was really seen there, I was really supported there. My dear friend Maron who I'm very close with still, who's an angel, I met there and we called each other sisters, you know. And I would say it was, meeting all these people there that I started to have more of a political awakening.

O'Brien: What does a political awakening mean for you?

Fuentes: For me it was—when the word femme was introduced to my life [laughter]. When people acknowledged my hardness in the way that I go and engage with the world, and the way

that the world engages with me. And that was held and that was something that was like, encouraged about my femme identity, my hard femme identity. And the way in which I deeply wanted to see other people, that was supported. Um, yeah. That was the political.

O'Brien: What were some of the challenges of working there?

Fuentes: Um, I mean definitely engaging with the public. It's—trans people who have retail jobs and have jobs in which they're interacting face to face with people it's like, that's really hard work. It's really hard work especially when you're engaging with people's sexualities and all of the messiness and everything that's involved in that. That area in particular I worked nights, always, pretty much exclusively. So I was always scheduled on the weekends, so in that area on Rivington St is bars where like drunk, masc bros wooing, yelling at us from outside, harassing us, prank phone calls, being sexually harassed, um, being physically accosted, just all sorts of messiness. Um, and, frankly I experienced a lot of transmisogyny within the company itself. The way that trans bodies were just kind of not acknowledged by the owners. A lot of like, you're asking for too much. Directives from the top, um, that type of stuff.

O'Brien: Do you remember, how long were you at Babeland?

Fuentes: I was there for a full year, and then I was deeply unhappy. I was really irritated with the way, the direction they were going and how trans women were treated in general and just the race problem within that place. And, so, my friend Lena who was working there, she ended up leaving to go work at The Pleasure Chest, and she talked me into going. She was like, girl you gotta come here, they don't do x, y, z thing like over there. It's so much better. They treat you like shit at Babeland, come over to The Pleasure Chest. So I went and had an interview there and got a job at the West Village store.

O'Brien: What were some of their concrete things that drew you to The Pleasure Chest?

Fuentes: There seemed to be—and this is like widely contested between—the culture just seemed different. There seemed to be two—Babeland and The Pleasure Chest have two different approaches that aren't as distinct as one might think. But I would say that there is a tone that's different between the two companies and in the way that you're trained. I remember at the time, as I was leaving Babeland there was a lot of issues around porn at Babeland, and like half the people wanted to get rid of the porn, half of the people wanted to keep it, and then that started to have like issues around sex workers. And like people feeling like all porn is exploitative versus some people who don't feel like it was.

O'Brien: These were debates amongst the staff?

Fuentes: Amongst the staff.

O'Brien: Or amongst the management?

Fuentes: Amongst the staff and it became conflict with the management.

O'Brien: What were the lines of demarcation?

Fuentes: There were complaints that the porn that was carried at the time, there was racist porn, there was really gross trans porn that was—narratives around like, I don't even remember specifically but there was problematic trans porn there. The owners and the retail managers at the time were like, we're not getting rid of this porn and the workers were like, get rid of the porn, it's fucked up. So there was conflict and I left for The Pleasure Chest which ended up having way more porn and nobody seemed to have a problem with it. So that was like, I was like ok I guess that's interesting. And the tone and the way people talked about sex seemed just different at The Pleasure Chest. I'm trying to say how it's different, um, I would say that it has to do with the branding that The Pleasure Chest is a sexy place. That's how The Pleasure Chest brands itself. It's a very like, we're "sexy". While, I don't know, which lead to interactions that seemed more like—when I first started I was like, that's a little bit weird, but, ok, I guess that's normal here. Where I was just like more, there was more room for the public to be a little more—to push the boundaries with the workers a little bit more and that was maybe a little more accepted at The Pleasure Chest than it was at Babeland. But yeah.

O'Brien: So, after you left Babeland the unionisation effort got under way.

Fuentes: Mhmm.

O'Brien: Did you keep in touch with that, did you hear much about it as it was going on?

Fuentes: I didn't. I didn't even know it was happening when I was there and then one day Lena and Phoenix came to visit me at work, and brought some stuff and were like, let's go outside and talk, how's it been going? And I at the time, I was having a lot of problems. I was having a lot of conflict with my manager at the time, who's since left.

O'Brien: When was this?

Fuentes: This was two years ago. Um, I was having, this man was just—there was a lot of conflict. Racism, covert transmisogyny. Just being, in general, gaslit when I would make complaints. And, um, just really struggling to have agency in the workplace. One of the, actually, the key differences now that I'm thinking about it was that at The Pleasure Chest we weren't really encouraged to kick people out, but at Babeland you could kick somebody out without any questions. Like your co-workers would 100 per cent back you up. But there was a tone that the management had set at The Pleasure Chest, which still exists today, which is something that there's conflict around, about the ability to actually kick people out. Um, and just in general had a lot of conflict. And so we talked about it and they were like how's it been going, blah, blah, blah. And I was just like really upset at the time and generally other co-workers were also upset with a lot of things and seeing a lot of things that were happening around us. So they were like, do you want to set up a meeting with someone to see what you could do about this? And so I was

like sure. I trusted the two of them. And that is when I met with Pete and Stephanie, at the RWDSU.

O'Brien: So, two years ago last month was when Babeland went public with their campaign.

Fuentes: Mhmm.

O'Brien: Do you know if, at the point when you were talking with them, they had gone public?

Fuentes: Yep. They had already gone public. Yeah I think so.

O'Brien: So tell me, had you ever encountered a union before?

Fuentes: No! That's the thing, that's the really interesting thing and it has been a part of my, like, political consciousness as it is now. Never heard of it—like, I'd heard of unions, you know. I knew about unions in a, like, pop sense. To me my association was like, factory workers, the mid-West, farmworkers. But nobody in my family had ever been in—or I think my mom says now that there was a cousin that was in a union or something, but my parents had never been in a union. My siblings have never been in a union. Honestly, unions in Texas...

O'Brien: It's a rough place to have a union.

Fuentes: It's a very rough place to have a union. And I mean, probably the fact that my dad worked in oil and gas and had an office job meant that there was just like, probably, like—unions aren't that great, or something, or we don't need unions. So it was an enormous, enormous thing that I felt I was risking. I really was, didn't know anything. But when I met with Pete and Stephanie they explained it to me.

O'Brien: What were your impressions of them? They were part of the RWDSU staff.

Fuentes: They're RWDSU staff. They were organizers. Um, I was, you know, I immediately read them as, you know, lefty white people [laughter]. They were really earnest and eager in the way that they engaged with me, engaged with my body, engaged with the way that they were talking to me about—they were really careful about explaining everything in detail. And, yeah. It was very nice, they were very nice, I would say. So that's, yeah, that's when I signed the card. I was like holy shit what did I just do. But I texted my friends and I was like, ok, I did it, and this is the moment, and yeah.

O'Brien: Do you, had they started talking to other workers at that point, at The Pleasure Chest?

Fuentes: No. Not that I know of.

O'Brien: And, um, so what were the next steps of the campaign, after they connected with you?

Fuentes: After they connected with me we, they were like, ok, let's start. They explained the fundamentals of you know, like, nothing that you're doing—you're protected, regardless. Like, my workers rights basically. That it's legal for me to talk to a union. That the company doesn't know that I signed a card. That it's not a legally binding thing, or that, like I don't suddenly have to pay dues because I signed a card. Just like the really key things that there's a lot of misinformation about in terms of the RWDSU itself. Um, and they were, we did this mapping exercise where they were like, tell me about all the people that you work with and we're going to scale them from 1 being the least interested in a union to 5 being very like engaged...

O'Brien: That's the scale that we use in, um, the UAW [United Automobile Workers].

Fuentes: Yeah, so, we did that exercise which was so cool. And it was a lot of me using my interpersonal skills. Very good at reading people, and just like plotting—I'm a Scorpio, so I'm just like all about the plotting and seeing things. And yeah, so, from there they were just like, ok so can you pick one person who you feel like you can reach out to, that you feel safe to reach out to. And then we started, and I did. So a big push was to start agitating. And so I started agitating. And it wasn't very hard, because everyone was already really agitated. We were all exhausted. A lot of people were overworked. We were experiencing—in my time at The Pleasure Chest, you know, I've been physically assaulted, I've been spat at, I've been sexually assaulted unfortunately, I've...

O'Brien: Do you want to tell any specific stories about any of those things?

Fuentes: I mean one of the things which is so, such a trans, it's such at the intersection of transness is, I was standing outside of the store, this was night time in the West Village, I was closing. Most of my jobs have always scheduled me at night because I tend to, I like sell well, or whatever. And I was standing outside by myself, I was checking my phone or just like taking a breather, it was like a couple of minutes before we close the store. And this guy was walking with a bunch of other dudes and stopped to, I turned and looked and he had a camera up and he was going to take my picture, and I turned my head and was like please no pictures, which is something that I've experienced for a very long time. It's a type of violence that is, that I'm very familiar with. Flashes, cameras, um, and something that's actually really triggering for me. So I turned around, I said no, no, I think I probably even said something like "no fucking pictures" or something and walked inside. Well he started yelling and followed me into the store, and I was closing with my co-worker, Emma, and he was like, come back, come back, I'm not a bad guy, you don't have to be a bitch like that. And I was just like, come on dude we're closing, I'm really not interested in a photo. And he was like "I like your fucking look, you have a cool fucking look, why won't you just relax and let me take your picture" and he was like, you have no idea who I am, I work in fashion. And I was just like standing there, I was like, what do you want? Like, just leave. And he hopped a fucking loogie and spit in my eye and it was the most—[sigh] it was degradation, just like pure—he had this look of disgust. Like, how—could you say no to me?

O'Brien: He was entitled.

Fuentes: Entitled. Very entitled. And, it was just, that was just one experience amongst all sorts of other things. Daily phone harassment. And the inevitable nature of being mis-gendered every day. I'm not something I think of yet that passes. Um, sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. It's always a big question of why one day I don't and why one day I do, which I'm sure other trans women can relate to. But you know that is a violence that is, is violence. I mean, violence is multi-faceted, right, it doesn't look like just one thing. And on top of the fact that I experience date violence on the regular. My precarity is that I'm a low wage worker. I rely on ACA [Affordable Care Act]. I rely on doctors at a community health centre to not be gatekeepers, yet there always are. And you know, transitioning in New York is much better than in other places, but still not a walk in the fucking park.

O'Brien: What were some of the challenges with the relationships of management or behaviour of management that led people at The Pleasure Chest to want to unionize?

Fuentes: Misogyny. Misogyny and racism. I personally experienced—and my other co-workers who are of colour experienced—and one of my co-workers who had been there longer than I had was just like, this is old shit, this person has always been like this. Um.

O'Brien: Did this take the form of preferential mistreatment or...?

Fuentes: Right. Preference—

O'Brien: Or sexual harassment or...

Fuentes: There was, covert—covert, covert, covert, covert. That is The Pleasure Chest. It is a place that misogyny, transmisognoir, um, and all these other, like, isms, are very covert. It's part of the, it's a shame to say but it's part of the fabric of the place. Um, but yeah. Lots of tones of, I mean I had been called "difficult" when I would raise, when I would complain. I have been called "hard to reach" when I would pull away from toxic interactions. I, it was insinuated that I was lazy when I would be—I have chronic health problems. I have rheumatoid arthritis. I've been accused of being lazy. Or, not overtly accused, but it was suggested that I was taking too long of a break than was afforded to other people. Um, my dress. The way that I dress. Oftentimes other people would, AFAB people would be wearing crop tops and I would wear kind of a crop top, not really, but it would be called into question. Seeing the way...

O'Brien: Dress codes again.

Fuentes: Dress codes again. Oh dress codes. I fucking hate dress codes. Um, and just seeing the way that this particular manager would relate to people of colour that came in, things like, oh I think that they're stealing. Really just gross shit like that, where I'm just like, what? One of my earliest memories of this person was just, me and my co-worker, Harley, were working together, and they're black. And we were working together and we'd finished our task and we were just kind of standing around, like nobody was coming into the store. And this manager comes upstairs and drops a box really loudly on the counter and was like, y'all don't look like you have much to

do, and we were like, ok. And it was a box of like hundreds of pens. And he was like, I'm going to go on my 30 but I want you to test every single pen. And we were like—I. When I walked out the door I asked Harley, I was like, is this normal, like? And they were like, so completely confused and was like, he's in one of his moods. Um, and I felt really degraded by that, felt really, really degraded. It did not sit right with me. It did not sit right with me. Two non-white workers—just “standing around” not doing their job, must need something to do. Mm.

O'Brien: What are the racial demographics of the staff? How many staff are there in total? How many people of colour?

Fuentes: That's a really good question. Um, let's see, I think there's at this point 14 non-management positions.

O'Brien: At how many stores?

Fuentes: Two stores. The Upper East Side and the West Village. I would actually have to look to verify that number but, um, at the time it was a different demographic. There was, let's see, three non-white workers at the West Village, and the Upper East Side at the time, like at least two years ago, was four or five non-white workers.

O'Brien: Out of?

Fuentes: Let's see [counts]. One, two, three, four, five. So actually maybe two non-white workers out of—five, at the Upper East Side location. So now there is, um, at the Upper East Side location there is now four non-white people including one manager out of—nine workers. And what was interesting about the union-busting campaign was that we were very much, when they launched their union busting campaign after we had unanimously voted—they were adamant that they were a diverse workplace. They provided a pie chart of us, of allegedly the whole company. They gave us numbers and figures on the diversity quotas that they had fulfilled and, therefore, that they were not, as we were claiming, racist.

O'Brien: That your experience of racism was just a, silliness on your part.

Fuentes: Of course. That's what racism is, right [laughter].

O'Brien: So, um, yeah. So you guys win. Tell me about the timeline. So you're gathering cards, secretly...

Fuentes: We're gathering cards, secretly. I was so nervous. And this was before, this was before Orlando—Which was, in my mind is a clear memory and a marker of—you know at first it was kind of, it was a slow process. It was like, I felt like, as much as I worked with these people I wasn't sure who would be, you know, who would—accidentally outed. My precarity was heightened by it. And there was a lull, there was a period of a lull where I hadn't talked to anybody. Where I kind of, you know, Pete texted me. They were busy with the Babeland contract and negotiations.

And then Orlando happened and [sigh] my, like, that shifted a lot of stuff for me, the shooting in Orlando. And, it, I experienced a long period of despair and emotional pain. And that's when I was like, ok, we have to like, push for this. We have to do this, this is world-building shit. So that's when things started to speed up a lot. I ended up requesting a transfer from the West Village to the Upper East Side. I was like, listen, I'm experiencing a lot of violence here. In the back of my head I was also like, this is a good opportunity to start building there. It just really quickly happened. And other people were engaging too and organising as well, so it happened pretty quickly. We had two people that were, that ended up leaving or being fired, which is a really—the context in which one person was fired, Aliyah, was kind of central to the campaign, central to the anti-Black violence that happens and has happened at The Pleasure Chest, which is probably somebody who would be worth talking to. But it started to speed up. At least in my memory, it was starting to speed up in the Fall, it was like, we're getting really close. And then finally we had, there was like one person left, and I distinctly remember who that is, and I was like, I don't know, I don't know what they would vote for, but we had the numbers, we had a 100 per cent chance of winning a vote, and we voted.

O'Brien: So to go through the National Labour Relations Board, you file the cards—

Fuentes: Correct.

O'Brien: And then it becomes public.

Fuentes: Correct.

O'Brien: And then the employer finds out. Did they find out before you filed?

Fuentes: Nope. They got a phone call, allegedly.

O'Brien: When did you file? Do you remember?

Fuentes: Oh man, I don't remember the filing date. I should remember that! I really don't remember the filing date. Do you know?

O'Brien: I don't know the filing date, I haven't spoken to enough Pleasure Chest workers yet. And then, about five weeks later there was an election?

Fuentes: Yes.

O'Brien: And that gives them a lot of chance to harass you all.

Fuentes: Yes. Harassment. Exactly. That is—

O'Brien: What form did that take?

Fuentes: It's called union-busting [laughter], as I came to learn.

O'Brien: They hired an evil law firm.

Fuentes: So they lawyered the fuck up. They got Jackson Lewis. I remember Pete, being in a meeting with Pete and being like, oh we just found out who is going to represent The Pleasure Chest and he showed us the papers and it was Jackson Lewis. I had no idea who Jackson Lewis was. I was like, ooh that's really bad, but also I was like, who is that [laughter]. And he was just like, they're mean and they're scary and they win. And I was like, big gulp. I was like, okay. And then they also, on top of that, hired a private union-busting firm. I forget the name of them but this man, god I have erased his name from my memory. He came. He was. He was actually a Peruvian man. Definitely clocked him as a, just a very conservative, probably right wing guy. And at this point they had no idea. In hindsight I found out that they thought that all of the, none of the West Village was interested, and they thought that because I was in the Upper East Side and had been a part of so many complaint processes within the company and had had a lot of conflict with my managers and had been very vocal. So they kind of, they thought that the Upper East Side was where all the problems were. But we were subject to these mandatory meetings. One of the things that was really, and it was such a, I was like y'all a fools for doing that, fools! Because it really actually, that is what—those mandatory meetings was really what cemented all of us together. We went through this amazing training that Stephanie and Pete had built together, and at this point Kim Ortiz had been added to our—who is an organizer with the RWDSU—had been added onto it. And they called it an inoculation meeting in which they trained us on what to expect and what to be prepared—they had this bingo game that we played and they played recordings of union busting meetings and we had to bingo all of the like classics of the union-busting campaigns, like you're going to have to pay like six times your salary in dues and a lot of, like, as soon as you sign your union card that's when you start paying your union dues, which is not true for the RWDSU. There was a lot of mythology around, like, it's going to be impossible to talk to your managers, management's not going to be allowed to talk to you. You're going to sink the company, just the classics from what I understand of most union-busting campaigns. So we were really, really well-prepared. That is something that Pete and Stephanie really nailed in terms of this campaign, was making sure that they could not scare us out of it. And they didn't. One of the highlights of the meeting though, that was really a moment in which I, like, audibly was just like, what?! Was like this guy, he was just like telling us over and over, really condescending, like “learn your history, know your history, I'm not trying to scare you but here's the really scary part” and brought up Ronald Regan. Just, and the airport workers that had gone on strike during the Reagan years. And framed it in this way of like, poor Ronald Reagan [laughter].

O'Brien: [laughter].

Fuentes: And I was like so unbelievably, I literally I think I remember being like, what?! And furious. I was furious. I was like, you father-fucker, like you are not about to bring up Reagan to a room full of queer people. Like, how dare you. So, we actually lodged a complaint with Sarah Tomchesson who is like the director of retail. She's right under the owner of the company, there's only two who basically run the company. And I remember telling her in person, like, who have

you brought, who have you subjected us to. Because the whole way that it played out was, we are going to leave the room as the owner and Sarah, Brian and Sarah, were like we're going to leave the room and he's going to be able to tell you without us being here like everything you need to know. And I went up to Sarah afterwards and was like, he brought up fucking Ronald Reagan and she literally was like, oh Jesus Christ.

O'Brien: [laughter].

Fuentes: And she fucking knew, she knew, she knew she had messed up. This guy like, non-consensually touched one of my femme co-worker's knee in this really fucking sleazy, gross way. I ended up talking to him one on one about his daughter and how I remind him of his daughter, which was just so fucking creepy. And he was just like, she's very liberal, like you, you know you kids are very liberal thinking but y'all are so confused, was his comment, I feel bad for you...

O'Brien: You're a [inaudible] just give it a year! [laughter]

Fuentes: Yeah! Right!

O'Brien: When you're not a child anymore!

Fuentes: And I think his whole narrative was like he used to work for unions, right, I think that's the whole thing with people who do these things is they actually used to be people, who've flipped and want to make money. So I'm sure he did. I'm sure he was like, you know this Ronald Reagan guy isn't so bad, trickle economics. And the context of him being Peruvian. I still to this day wonder if Brian and Sarah specifically picked him because he was a man of colour, I really do.

O'Brien: Peru has a huge fascist movement.

Fuentes: Yeah! But it just, yeah. And I wonder how that process of him being hand-picked played out. They knew enough to, they knew that they couldn't send a white guy. I know that. Because one of the main things that Brian and Sarah had said was that they, in one of the beginning of the first meetings that they had, was Sarah got up and she said, I understand that I am a white queer femme, blah blah blah blah. And Brian was like, I also understand that I am a white gay, cis gay man.

O'Brien: So they were clued in that like racial resentments were a big part of the organizing—

Fuentes: Yes.

O'Brien: And they were sort of wanting to, like, reassure people that they were on-board with some sort of racial consciousness.

Fuentes: And this is after the election. One of the—

O'Brien: So they knew there was universal support for the union.

Fuentes: Absolutely. I—

O'Brien: They knew you all were strong.

Fuentes: At least in the Upper East Side. And, I found out later that they thought that the West Village wanted nothing to do with it. I don't know why.

O'Brien: Even though they had all voted for it?

Fuentes: This was before the election. This is the union-busting.

O'Brien: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Fuentes: So this is after, I'm sorry, the Presidential election.

O'Brien: Oh! I see, I see, okay.

Fuentes: So, you know, Donald Trump had just won. And we were all reeling. Sarah had sent out this long email.

O'Brien: Oh so that tells us the date of when, roughly...

Fuentes: Yeah, roughly, right. Sarah sent out this long email. That she signed it, in solidarity, Sarah. They rolled out a—and this is something that is so key to this, organizing queer workers and organizing at The Pleasure Chest. They rolled out this campaign for the company which was “resist.” It was rainbow letters, resist. The Pleasure Chest leg logo was made up of queer leaders, of Alice Walker, Miss Major, [laughter] Ellen Degeneres was like added into this list. bell hooks. bell fucking hooks' name is in this fucking Pleasure Chest—the most neoliberal—that is the essence of The Pleasure Chest, that campaign, was come here, shop the resistance, bell hooks in our logo, and Alice Walker in our logo, and Miss Major in our logo. It's grotesque. I was floored and to this day I am never going to—that is the core, the visual core of so-called feminist, sex shop places, as well as start-up culture in general.

O'Brien: This crass appropriation of radical legacies as a way to sell.

Fuentes: Absolutely. And meanwhile \$12.50 an hour starting wage for a worker in the Upper East Side.

O'Brien: So you all filed, Trump was elected, they rolled out this absurd campaign, they brought in a union-buster. You had mandatory meetings. Then you had a vote, you had unanimous support.

Fuentes: Unanimous support. One person didn't vote at all, which is, to this day—it's not important, but it's still considered a unanimous vote, according to the organizers. Everybody said yes.

O'Brien: And what was their reaction? I mean, I imagine that it was a bit of a shock to them if they had—

Fuentes: It was. So my mom had actually flown into town, because she had known that I was doing this...

O'Brien: She was proud of you.

Fuentes: Yeah, she was really proud of me. She flew into town. I had invested so much energy and resources into this and, um, it was so dramatic. There was a literal live count. Um, we all crowded into the basement, the workshop space in the Upper East Side and the NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] agent. Yes. Yes. Yes.

O'Brien: And this is how many? First fourteen?

Fuentes: Yes, fourteen altogether. Um, and we crowded into this basement and this NLRB agent yes after yes after yes. And just the most elated feeling. I cried. My mom held me. It was just so special because we did that. We organized across, you know the shit that makes organizing so hard across all of these intersections of privilege and oppression. We all voted yes, which is momentous and I do believe that it is historic.

O'Brien: How did you all do that, do you think, that kind of solidarity?

Fuentes: [sigh] How did we do that? I mean there were so many conversations happening. There were so many namings in it. And what I mean by that is, like, saying that something was racist and a push for the white folks around us to name that. Um and from what I understand that's like something the labour movement in general, that's a struggle, how to organize through race and class stuff. And being I think that there was a tone—at least from what I was trying to do—about being explicit about what we're dealing with. And being accountable to each other and being accountable in the sense that we, like, walk the walk, we don't just perform our politics. When we say that we're anti-racist we mean that we're anti-racist. Um and I mean, there was, at the time there was so much happening globally. Everybody was shook. And I think we all understood that we are going to play a part in making something better possible.

O'Brien: You're going to be the actual resistance.

Fuentes: Right, right. The actual resistance. Um, there was a lot of sharing of information. One of bell hooks' essays, "Desire: Eating the Other," is essential reading for understanding The Pleasure Chest and understanding Babeland, in which she talks about everything that is The Pleasure Chest, where the promise of meeting the other and how our bodies are othered in society—

racialized bodies, trans bodies, racialized trans bodies. And that The Pleasure Chest is this invitation to come play out your racist, sexist, misogynistic desires. Another, Sara Ahmed, who was really, her work on feminist complaint really shifted the way that I understood complaint in the workplace. And you come to understand your place within an institution via the way the institution handles a complaint, which just like blew my fucking mind. Because you know I had experienced, I'd lodged so many complaints in this process of trying to be heard and trying to be seen and trying to have accountability and just experiencing the way that the institution wanted to suppress that and the way that other people—So there was a lot of literature sharing, zine sharing, which, I mean, some of my co-workers are super left, so that was really helpful in providing language and context for those who wouldn't necessarily identify as far left. Memes, sharing leftist memes was so helpful in this group chat that we were in. Um, femme for femme memes were widely circulated amongst us.

O'Brien: How many trans workers were there?

Fuentes: Let's see—Um, four of us.

O'Brien: Did you all share a similar experience?

Fuentes: So, something that happened in this process, you know, one of my friend's—she's a black trans woman who's incredible—was able to get her a job. We really pushed and advocated for her to get a job. She ended up experiencing so much violence, so much misogynoir. Like peer misogynoir at the Upper East Side location, which just drove, pushed her out of that place. There's another trans masc co-worker of mine who's a man of colour and who's very vocal about, you know, that we have very different experiences of the workplace, you know, and his privileges definitely as a masc person—masculinity seems to be a thing that gets you a pass with management. And another trans friend of mine, she ended up leaving just because, you know, her own mental health stuff. So, I'm the only trans woman that works there now.

O'Brien: Wow. So you won the vote, and you've been in contract negotiations for a long time.

Fuentes: Yeah, for almost a friggin year.

O'Brien: What are you fighting for?

Fuentes: Yeah, what are we fighting for. So, um—there—we have asked for an outside privilege and boundaries training, which is in the hopes that—what would be a mandatory meeting for both management and staff, which would—is going in the direction of shifting the culture, and moving the fabric around a little bit at The Pleasure Chest. You know, privilege is a material aspect of the workplace, you know. Who gets to make high sales. Who gets rewarded for making high sales? Who, in the way that management interacts, privilege and power are enormous, you know, problems within the institution. So we've asked for this hoping to address those problems and create processes that are more accountable. We've asked for self defence trainings. You know,

I've—like I was saying earlier, have been physically assaulted. Other people have been physically accosted. It makes sense for sex shop workers to have some basic self-defence.

O'Brien: Why would they ever oppose these things? Trainings are neither expensive nor make it impossible to manage a business.

Fuentes: They do not see it as being related to—is what they have said—it is not related to our workplace. And the cost—I distinctly remember Brian Robinson saying, “this has cost me a lot.” Shaming us for doing this. I'm sure it has. I mean Jackson Lewis, those people make a lot. The lawyer that represents them is trying to become a partner in the firm, so he must be very, very, very expensive.

O'Brien: I'm sure he must spend far more on the lawyer fighting these trainings than the trainings could ever cost.

Fuentes: Absolutely. And one of the most interesting aspects of it is that Brian refuses to even say the word privilege. He won't even say a privilege and boundaries training he'll say a boundary training. And what we have said in our contract is that the privilege training will be coming from a black intersectional feminist angle. That's essential to the training itself. Not a word. Refuses, refuses to even say the word privilege. I've asked him. I said why can't you say the word privilege. He said, “because I'm not”.

O'Brien: So in his mind being gay?

Fuentes: Perhaps.

O'Brien: Or a human, or, who knows.

Fuentes: I mean who knows. I think that, I mean Brian is somebody who I would say grew up—I mean he's very wealthy. His family has property money. He has properties across the US. He lives in Santa Monica [laughter]. I mean, two stores in Chicago, a huge store in LA, two stores in New York.

O'Brien: All Pleasure Chest?

Fuentes: All Pleasure Chest.

O'Brien: Are you guys connected with the workers at the other stores?

Fuentes: I'd rather not say.

O'Brien: Ok. No problem. So these trainings. What else are you asking for?

Fuentes: So privilege and boundary training, self-defence trainings, and adequate staffing. So there is so many times when things have happened in the store, like assaults, verbal harassment and physical harassment, sexual harassment, it's because people are left on the floor alone. I mean a lot of my work experience at The Pleasure Chest has been just me by myself on the sales floor, and other people have similar experiences. So we've asked for at least a minimum of three people scheduled on the sales floor at all times, so that leaves room for breaks so that if somebody goes on a break they're not left on their own for thirty minutes, so there's another person on the sales floor. They have not hired—we are understaffed, currently, as we speak, as of today we are understaffed. They refuse to acknowledge that we're understaffed. People are working a lot. They just recently hired one person as a part time shipping receiving position, but there was enormous conflict around contract negotiations around allowing a shipping and receiving person to be in the bargaining unit. And then they ended up closing the shipping and receiving department that they were trying to build in New York and kept it in Los Angeles, which was very interesting. And we have initially, we have just recently, about a week and a half ago, maybe two weeks ago, um laid out our economic proposal. So generally how it works is the contract negotiations are non-economic agreements. So grievance, arbitration. We've obviously asked for a fair like grievance process. People have been fired for so many fucked up reasons and we're trying to restructure that where there's a fair and more balanced way of doing that, and who gets to decide that and what not. And we've just recently laid out our economic plan, which would be like our sick time, our pay, and insurance.

O'Brien: Will you get healthcare?

Fuentes: Huh?

O'Brien: Will you get decent healthcare?

Fuentes: Well hopefully! That's the goal, to get decent healthcare. We were like looking, we looked at what Pleasure Chest offers versus what the union offers. What the union offers it's just—better, in general.

O'Brien: They have a healthcare plan

Fuentes: They have a healthcare plan, Blue Cross Blue Shield which is—to my knowledge covers trans-exclusive stuff like hormone therapy.

O'Brien: They told me they sat down and read it very carefully around trans stuff before they started the campaign.

Fuentes: Absolutely, absolutely. Um, so, the company—to their credit—doesn't have the worst insurance in the world. But I think pretty much only middle management to upper management is on the healthcare plan and then maybe a couple of, well actually the people that would have been on there are now part of middle management, are on there, on the company's existing healthcare plan. But we are asking—you know the fight for fifteen campaign is so important and

iconic and great, but we decided to push for more, because we believe that we can get more. So we are asking for the high teens, pushing into the twenties for a starting wage at The Pleasure Chest. And then obviously the longer you work there the more benefits, just like other unions—the more pay, I mean, that you would accrue, which is exciting.

O'Brien: And is scheduling much a problem for you all? Do you get enough hours?

Fuentes: So something that was different about Babeland versus The Pleasure Chest is that The Pleasure Chest has always offered full time hours while Babeland never did. So that was actually one of the aspects that was appealing when I moved, was I can actually get full time hours here. The issue with it is staffing, is that people who have been hired—I've seen three times now—people who've been starting off as pretty much part time have consistently been asked to work full time hours, and then we're still having issues getting adequate staffing. So scheduling wasn't one of the main focuses for staff at The Pleasure Chest as it was—an important aspect of Babeland.

O'Brien: And you mentioned the role of black politics in the, some of the workers being very left and sort of that contribution. What are some of the political currents that have informed or enriched the work?

Fuentes: I would say black feminist thinking. I mean bell hooks' work is circulated. I would say that there's definitely a communist, socialist undercurrent burgeoning.

O'Brien: Seems like there's a developing community amongst queer workers.

Fuentes: I would absolutely say that. The DSA recently threw their support online on Twitter to our organizing efforts which was really sweet of them. But yeah. I would, I would, yeah, it's still a developing process.

O'Brien: Of course. And how has it changed your politics?

Fuentes: I mean, the big question is where do you go from here, in the sense of how I see myself, how I've come to understand myself as a worker, and my role in the workplace as well as my role in community. I, the thought of even leaving The Pleasure Chest is so interesting because I'm like, how could I even go to any other type of workplace that doesn't have this. Um, the practice of my politics in this workplace—actually doing my politics in the workplace, showing up, is, was essential to that. I think it's really easy to perform things but who's going to have your back when you're just performing.

O'Brien: When there are high stakes struggles you learn who has your back.

Fuentes: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

O'Brien: And one thing I've thought about is, um, a lot of queer politics involves some deciding who's politically right on enough and who's politically problematic.

Fuentes: Ugh god yeah.

O'Brien: But union politics is more about trying to figure out how to win over even the problematic people.

Fuentes: Right! [Laughter] exactly.

O'Brien: Is there a, how did you guys grapple with that tension, you know, like, the union politics, you know, sometimes tends towards conservatism as a result, like the lowest common denominator, but other times tend towards trying to win people over to a politics that they might not initially be totally on board with.

Fuentes: Right.

O'Brien: And so it's a different way of thinking about your allies. You know who you need on your side—

Fuentes: Right.

O'Brien: —before you start. And they're not necessarily the people you like the most always.

Fuentes: Right. I mean, wow. That is so accurate for I mean even, recently, ally-ship, performance, and the workplace that we all work in. I think what's interesting though, and why there seems to be a little bit of a left leaning current with like Babeland and The Pleasure Chest is kind of like the nature of the work. It's coming from a place of like, none of us were given this information and we have to kind of put in the work to get access to the information and understand how to talk about the information. So the people that we work with do have, like have critical thinking skills, of course. I work with really smart people who, their intellect is unrecognized because they're low-wage-workers, right. But in general there's this tone and a willingness at the workplace to— because a lot of times we're dealing with things we don't understand, about sex, and sexuality, and power. And I think that there's a general, a very general sense of like, at it's best it's like, I don't understand this but I want to know more. Because we're constantly having to do that for the work that we do. We're constantly having to meet people where they're at in their own process and journey of their sex and sexuality. So I think that there's this critical understanding that we also are going through that as well, which is I think unique to places like Babeland and The Pleasure Chest. You have to be a really fucking smart person to do the job that we do [laughter]. To just meet somebody and just understand all of these intersections that they're coming from and to be able to encapsulate and meet them where they're at, mirror their language. We have the, those are skills that are essential to political work, I believe.

O'Brien: It makes for good militancy.

Fuentes: [Laughter] exactly! So yeah.

O'Brien: What do you see as the future of trans movements like coming out of this work, in your own transformation, politicization. In the currents that you've seen developing in the world.

Fuentes: Well first we have to organize. We need to organize pretty quickly. I mean people have been organizing for crisis management and all sorts of things for much longer than we've been alive. But for me I see what's happening across the US with this fucking government and a lot of people are scared and what is that like, organisers saying, don't despair, organize. But what I see is that we have to truly—Like what has happened at The Pleasure Chest needs to happen across New York, across the state, across the country, and globally. We're as connected as we've ever been as trans people, um I think we have to—I personally think that I have to make a more global connection to the siblings, um, and that we have to come from a place that we understand that we're all at intersections of power and privilege, and truly, truly move in a direction that is acknowledging that. Because even amongst our own community there is a lot of disparate experiences. I mean we live in a time that like, not to be corny, but like there's somebody like Hari Nef and there's someone like Caitlyn Jenner and there's, you know, somebody like Janet Mock and there's somebody like, these people who, who inhabit the US consciousness, and we have to organize for better lives within our own small communities. I mean we are like what is it, three times less likely to be employed. How do we, I mean just like, the only way that we can get jobs, in my head, what I'm understanding, is we have to have strong unions. We have to build the security itself, like the job security itself. We have to change these institutions, we have to change the academy, we have to change like, you know, these jobs that we work at, in order to like force open that shit. We have to force it open. It's not just going to be given to us, especially now. Um, and something that I think that we have to really critically, and something that I'm critically thinking about is scarcity, and the myths around scarcity, and what that does to us as a community. The mythologies of scarcity are like, it's so powerful, and it makes people act in ways that are like so—we don't think is us but scarcity does really fucked up things to our heads.

O'Brien: What is thinking beyond scarcity?

Fuentes: Oh god. Thinking beyond scarcity, that's a really good question. I think inhabiting our possibility. I think possibility models. I mean I'm 27 and there's like so many cute little trans kids becoming—I was recently talking to a friend and they're doing work with trans youth and helping them get their name changed and stuff. And how incredible an experience that was for them to have proximity to like young trans kids who are like, in schools, in primary schools and middle schools and high schools. Um, and we're maybe moving, for myself at least it's like maybe moving away from these ideas of being a role model but maybe more of a possibility model. Maybe that's an aspect of moving beyond scarcity. I haven't fully figured it out yet though.

O'Brien: Let us know when you do.

Fuentes: I will, I'll tweet it out [laughter].

O'Brien: Anything else you'd like to share with us in this lovely oral history?

Fuentes: Um, wow. I guess I would say that I feel enormously proud of what's happened at The Pleasure Chest. I am so proud of my co-workers who showed up. I'm so proud of myself for showing up. And I'm so excited to see the world building shit, so excited to see it.

O'Brien: Beautifully said.