

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

MYLO MENDEZ

Interviewer: Aoife Smith

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Aoife Smith: OK—Hello, my name is Aoife Smith and I will be having a conversation with Mylo Mendez for the New York City Trans Oral History project in collaboration with the New York Public Libraries Community Oral History Project. It is an oral history project centered on the experience of trans identified people. It is June 11, 2019 and this is being recorded at New York Public Library Administrative Offices in New York. Alright—

Mylo Mendez: Good job.

Smith: Thank you. [laughter]

Mendez: [laughter]

Smith: Um, so I guess I'll start off by asking you where you're from, where you grew up.

Mendez: Uh, I'm from outside of Houston, I was born in Houston, Texas and I grew up just kind of like on the outsides of it so, not in the main city, but that's where I grew up, and that's where I lived until I was 17/18 and then I moved to Austin and now I'm here. [laughter]

Smith: What was childhood outside of Houston like?

Mendez: Um, it was pretty good, yeah I think the South gets kind of a bad rap but, um, Houston has a really interesting and very queer history there's—it's a very large city similar to New York so—I think New York is roughly 8 million people, Houston's like 6, so it's also very large but it's very spread out [clears through] and in the center of Houston is a neighborhood called Montrose and it's like a gayborhood, it has lots of bars and lots of queer-owned businesses, and there was a time when it was like very seedy and [chuckles] I once read a—I found an old news article about it and I don't remember the exact decade but it was very seedy and...

Smith: [laughter]

Mendez: ...kind of like a queer underworld but now it's very family-queer oriented, um, and the pride parade—it used to happen in that area because that's a very queer area, now it's been moved to the business district, which happened recently and I think that seems appropriate as pride becomes more um, [laughter] corporate—and appropriated in that way. Though people were very sad and upset, it actually makes perfect sense that that would happen, unfortunately. So, even though I grew up on the outside of that part of the city, there were still ways for me to get there. When I was young, I would go see punk shows in that area and that's where I met my first partner... [laughter]

Smith: [laughter]

Mendez: ... at like 17, you know that sort of thing, so yeah, it was cool.

Smith: So, when did you first realize your queer and trans identities? Was that when you were still in Houston?

Mendez: Yes, so I think...being queer- I mean I think that happened when I was- or I began to be like, oh fuck you know... [laughter]

Smith: [laughter]

Mendez: ...something—something is happening! Um, yeah when—like puberty, so probably when I was like 14 or 15 or whatever. But I didn't come out while I was in high school, openly, because there wasn't a lot of people out at that time. Um, this is like early 2000s, I graduated from high school in 2007. So, I had my first partner while I was a senior in high school, but I wasn't out at that time to my family or to most of my friends, just close friends. And then, a trans identity I came more into maybe a couple years later, about two or three years later so early twenties... [phone dings]

Mendez: Sorry, that was my phone. [laughter]

Smith: OK. [laughter]

Mendez: Let me turn that off.

Smith: I was like, is there a doorbell in this room? [laughter]

Mendez: [laughter] ...yeah, but it's kind of one of those things where you look back at your childhood and you're like, woah, I was definitely playing with gender and I was definitely really queer. There was a—I don't remember the age, and I would have to—I would have to ask my mom and my brothers, but there was a period when I was little where I donned a denim jacket and I made my family call me Spike [laughter] —which is so gay!

Smith: [laughter] Maybe a little bit...

Mendez: Yeah, and I was young. I think I was probably like 6 or 7, or something like that and so there was a short period, maybe a week or two period where that was how I identified... [laughter]

Smith: Amazing.

Mendez: Yeah, yeah, I feel like such a [inaudible].

Smith: Did you have—I know you said you were not out to a huge amount of people in high school—but did you have other queer or trans friends that you could talk to about that stuff?

Mendez: Not really, no. So, I think—honestly, I think what helped was it was like the heyday of myspace right, so... [laughter]

Smith: [laughter]

Mendez: ... it was like being online and... It's funny because, now, or even just a few years later it's like, oh, of course a lot of my friends at the time would end up coming out as well. It's like somehow queers, whether we know it at that time or not, find each other. But at the time, I didn't really openly talk with a lot of people—I think I had one or two friends that I was out to. Um, I would eventually come out to my oldest brother before I moved to Austin—before I went to college in Austin. And then—Yeah, I honestly think it was mostly—probably an online thing and being like, oh there's queers blah blah blah. And there were resources actually in the center—in Montrose, there's a Montrose health center and they have resources for queer and trans folks there um, but I think I was too shy at the time to actually utilize those resources—yeah.

Smith: How was your family with all of that—um—when did you eventually like tell your whole family and...?

Mendez: Yeah, so I came out to my—well I came out to my oldest brother before I moved, and he was totally chill with it. Yeah, he was very sweet. And then I would eventually come out to my mom I think like—of course it was when me and my first partner broke up, so I was like heartbroken, so I called her, and I was crying. She was totally ok with me being queer, she was very sweet about it. I mean I think they probably—you know... [laughter]

Smith: [laughter] It's like that sometimes.

Mendez: Yeah, and then, you know, my father is really cool about—yeah, my family, for the most part, has been really cool about being queer. They can be kinda weird about gender stuff—I think it's very hard for them to understand that because they're all pretty comfortable. I have uh—I have two older brothers and so my oldest brother, Peter, I'm closer with, and my middle brother, Nick, we've always been like on the outs with each other, we don't really get along and so I never really came out to him. But he knew through my family and also it was pretty obvious that my family just knew because, since we didn't get along, he would often say things to me that were, you know—we knew how to push each other's buttons sort of thing. He would end up becoming a correctional officer, which is the opposite of what I... [laughter]

Smith: Hmm, yeah.

Mendez: ...So we went in two very, very different directions and progressively our politics and our personal lives just like—have been at opposite ends, which explains the um, the fact that we don't get along with each other. But yeah, other than that everyone's been chill. They've met—they've all met all of my partners and yeah, they're very sweet.

Smith: That's so great.

Mendez: Yeah.

Smith: Where'd you go to college?

Mendez: I went to undergrad at the University of Texas in Austin and that was really great. Austin is um—it was a good place to go to college, I think for me it—it allowed me to be away from my family because it's about—Austin's like 3 hours away from Houston so it was a good amount of like, they're not right there sort of thing. Both of my brothers went to college in Houston and stuck around. Austin's also known as a very liberal city in Texas, which I think is debatable because I think Houston is very liberal and I think Texas itself can actually be very liberal—it's a—a majority people of color state. But all the representatives are old white men, so it gets sort of a bad rap for people who don't live there. Austin was really good, I immediately met a bunch of queers in Austin, befriended them, and they're people that I still am friends with to this day, so like your first little crew, you know, people who are a little bit older and they take you under their wing and so it was—it was good.

Smith: Great. So, how did you end up moving to New York?

Mendez: More school. [laughter] So I was an art—I studied art and women's and gender studies and then I... had some time, I think I applied for grad school maybe like two or three years after I graduated. I graduated undergrad in 2011 and then applied to go to art school, and all the places that I applied to were in New York because at that time my partner wanted to—if we were going to move out of Texas it was like basically they only wanted to go to New York and I was happy to go anywhere other than Texas because that's just where I had been. So, I applied to a couple places here, in New York, and decided to go to Parsons. That's where I went to grad school, again for art, and then I just kinda stuck around [laughter]. So, I was there, um, 2013-2015 and then, now I'm here. Still here.

Smith: Cool.

Mendez: Cool, cool.

Smith: Um, what was New York like for you when you first got here?

Mendez: It was good. Yeah so, my—I didn't really know anybody here. My partner at the time—I think part of the reason she wanted to move here—she's part of this radical communist group called Unity and Struggle and they're like a national group that puts out propaganda and analysis on what's going on in the world um, and so some of them lived in [hits microphone] New York and so it was sort of an easy transition for her, and therefore for me because we had connections here, to a certain degree, and she could continue doing her political work and at the time I was doing a lot of political work with her as well, and so it just seemed like the right fit. And it was good because we came here and we had contacts already, friendships, and people that could kinda plug us into um, both the political and sort of both the queer work that we wanted to do. And then because I—because I was coming for school it was also—it made it easier to sort of

make connections, and although my—my program wasn't super queer, it was still like, oh I had a place to be and to go and to meet people and through that was able to meet other people that were maybe more queer that could've done [inaudible] with.

Smith: Could you tell me about the political work you were doing?

Mendez: Yeah, so when I was in Austin—it's kind of like, one thing led to another but—when I was in Austin [laughter] first I became really involved with this uh vegan... [laughter]

Smith: [laughter]

Mendez: ...It's so silly. Um, so I got really into veganism. I was a vegetarian my last year in high school and then when I went to college I was like, oh finally, no one's buying my groceries. So here I am, a vegan and I met a group of other vegans and became besties with them, so got involved with a—an organization called Students Against Animal Cruelty [Students Against Cruelty to Animals], SACA, at UT and that was really cool. I mean we did kind of typical vegan things, like at the time there were pet stores in Austin that were selling dogs from puppy mills and so we would hold signs up in front of the Petco or whatever and do that and then just offer um, stuff on campus like a Thanksgiving dinner that wasn't meat—based and would table, and honestly, it was just like, our meetings would be like trying new vegan restaurants...

Smith: [laughter] [coughing]

Mendez: ...so it was mostly just a bunch of vegans hanging out, eating good food together. Um, but I got involved with that and got interested in sort of the more radical politics of it. We were able to get this speaker to come, I actually forget his last name, it's Peter something, um, and he is most known for releasing minks. There's—a fur—there was like eight major [hits microphone] fur factories, essentially, in the U.S. and I think they were mostly in the Midwest—I think because of the climate minks are more geared to living in that area—and so he did this thing where he went and he released a bunch of minks from these factories, and quite a few of them ended up closing actually. I think also because there's not—yeah it was amazing!

Smith: [laughter]

Mendez: And he was giving this talk about—he was like, it was very—sort of individual, anarchist, like, you shouldn't trust anybody else he—he did it with someone else and that person lead to him getting caught and so he spent time in prison, for several years I believe. He's released now, he got released, obviously he got released...and then came into this talk. But he was very much like, only you can do this, you need to be able to do this and look this works, I did these things and I went to jail for a little bit but look what happened, I closed down these things. And I was like, yes, like yes, and so I got really into ALF [Animal Liberation Front] and I didn't end up doing anything, but I believed very much in those politics. Like, fuck yes, the only way to stop this shit is not to just eat vegan dinners and get students to come to your vegan Thanksgiving but to do these direct actions and that's the only way blah blah blah. So, I was very, sort of heading down that line of politics, I would eventually meet my partner. And um, sort of our group of friends overlapped and they were—they started a group called [inaudible]. It was a—technically a

community group but it did a lot of work on campus and it—we mostly fought against—so at the time the University of Texas was making budget cuts and they were only cutting basically ethnic studies and women's and gender studies. I know, [laughter] I know, it's like, don't even try to hide what you're doing [laughter]...

Smith: [laughter]

Mendez: So [inaudible] was really involved in fighting against those cuts and we were really active in that. So, I got into that and um, meeting that group which could become my main group of friends and political mentors and stuff. They pushed back a little bit more on these very like individualistic ideas I had about direct action and I did a lot of reading groups with them and they're—they're sort of very much into um, Marx and Silvia Federici and groups and individuals that sort of put forward the idea that strength and change comes from community organizing and building and that sort of thing. And after many debates it sort of did appear to be true [laughter]. So, my politics began to sort of merge into that sort of thing—very less anarchist and— or that particular form of anarchism, because there are many forms that lead into very different things. So [inaudible] and then, when we moved to New York I guess there was one more thing—I started a queer reading group in Austin and that sort of turned into a blog and political analysis and then a zine pamphlet thing that I continued into New York. But when we moved to New York, we started the Florence Johnston Collective, which is a collective of reproductive care workers and we...defined reproduction as just rebuilding the person, so it wasn't just medical care workers, it was also teachers and people who do any form of care, right. And we wanted to do that just because...politically that's where attacks are happening right, so it's healthcare and it's education and I think it felt like it made sense at the time, so we did a couple of actions. At the time I lived in Crown Heights and they were closing a hospital, one of the public hospitals in Crown Heights. They did end up closing it and it's like, I don't know I guess in New York, hospitals were becoming privatized, but obviously that's a problem because they'll close the public hospitals and even though they're not—they tend to not be very good, that's because they're underfunded—it creates problems in that there's less hospitals in general so people that live in those communities where they're closing the hospitals, like if someone were to have a heart attack or an emergency they'd get rerouted to a hospital that's further away which is obviously a very big problem. So yeah, we did that, and that went on for...two years, maybe? We put out a... newspaper, The Florence Johnston Collective Newspaper, and that had interviews with the educators and nurses that we had met. But in general, that kind of organizing was very difficult. It was very difficult to get—we had one or two nurses and maybe a home health aide join and be interested in it, but I think like New York is really hard to get people who have families obviously, and who work full—time jobs and it can be very hard to, on top of that, ask all these organizing things of them. And then various disagreements between people, mostly the people who were on the left, who were participating in the group and not necessarily care workers themselves—it's like the infighting of the left sort of thing—so eventually the group would part ways. And then after that I didn't really do anything sort of explicitly political in that way. Now my work is mostly focused on self-defense for queers and trans folks, which is political in its own way but also not as explicitly in many of the ways that that other work was.

Smith: Um, I also, just on that foot, wanted to ask—how did you come up with the—or why did you decide on that name for the collective?

Mendez: The Florence Johnston Collective?

Smith: Yeah.

Mendez: Um, Florence Johnston is the—she's the maid in—uh, what's that show? ...It's a popular sitcom from... It's an all-black sitcom and the maid was the... she was always giving.... kind of like guff to the—to the people who ran the house or whatever and we just liked her. We thought she was a really—in that sitcom she was—one, it was a sitcom that people of this particular age could relate to—they would know what it was, and we just thought that she was so funny and witty and was kind of always the person putting these people, these wealthy people in their place and we were like, yes that's representative of what we'd like—[chair squeaks] what we'd like this kind of work to be represented by, so...

Smith: Cool. I also know you're really, or somehow involved in the punk scene.

Mendez: Yeah. [laughter]

Smith: Yeah. Do you want to talk about that?

Mendez: Yeah, I think—what in—when I was growing up in Houston I got into the punk scene, obviously because it's like, oh there's vegan music and it's kind of where the outcasts are and that sort of thing, and that just sort of stuck. When I moved to New York—I mean I still like punk music and hardcore music and then I just ended up making friends with some people who were in bands here, and venues like Silent Barn, which is no longer open but it was a venue in Bushwick that had a lot of shows—which is a good place to meet people and to hang out and where I ended up a lot. Um...yeah, I just ended up having roommates that were in queer punk bands and that sort of thing. Yeah, so I think I've just sort of been in and out of it a little bit—just as a fan, I've never really been in bands or anything like that. But I think I just—I'm really into zines and that goes hand in hand with punk culture.

Smith: Yeah, I think I read, or Michelle [Michelle O'Brien] told me that you were working for radical queer zine distribution.

Mendez: Yeah. [laughs]

Smith: Um, do you want to say more on that?

Mendez: Yeah, so that was the thing that—basically it was started as a reading group in Austin, and we started it—again, me and my partner at the time—we started it in Austin because we wanted—it's kind of like we had these two circles, one which were people who were really focused on politics and then queers who were really focused on community building but maybe

not as explicitly political, and so we started this reading group that kind of wanted those two groups to overlap. And so, we did it for a couple months in Austin and eventually it continued, I think for about a year. Some people took over hosting it and running it, which was really great because it meant that people got into it and were involved in it. And so, from that group we started a blog as a way to reflect on the things that we were reading and, again we wanted to do something more with the blog, so eventually the blog became a pamphlet and zine distributor and we called it, "We're Hir, We're Queer" um, Hir but Hir as in the pronoun hir.

Smith: Yeah.

Mendez: And so, with We're Hir, We're Queer basically we authored and published, but also had—would sell other people's zines relating to mostly queer theory and queer history. So, we pamphletized essays that we thought were really important and we pamphletized work by political groups that were at that time current—so this is like between 2012 and 2017. Yeah—groups, anybody that was putting out things that were sort of radical and political and also we wanted to make connections with things so we'd often like pamphletize things about immigration because [hits microphone] immigration is a queer issue and that sort of thing, trying to—trying to make connections for people and with people. And so, we did that for a while. That was really fun. We tabled a lot of anarchist book fairs, the one here in New York, our friends put one on in Atlanta and we did that, and we tabled um, Feminist Zinefest here in New York too and like a couple places. One in DC, just zine fests mostly here around the Northeast but occasionally in Houston and other places in the South. Yeah, and that sort of folded [laughter] after my partner and I parted ways, which is I think a common thing, unfortunately. I kept going with it for a little while longer but then I sort of turned my—I still do zine stuff. I actually recently just tabled this past weekend, but it just wasn't We're Hir, We're Queer stuff, so still love zines but it's good...

[someone sneezes]

Mendez: [laughter] Bless you.

Smith: [laughter] Um, can you talk about how your—or just what your art is now and what you went to school for—like what kind of art you do and all that...?

Mendez: Oh yeah that's so funny, yeah, I don't know, it's weird, I don't really do art—[laughter]

Smith: [laughter]

Mendez: —you go to school and you realize the art world is this terrible place. No, it's good, I mean, it was good, basically, you know, I think when you're an undergrad, art school is kinda like you're just figuring out what you want—are you interested in art, that sort of thing. And then I went to grad school because with—for artists, master's is the terminating degree. So I can teach with a masters and I wanted to teach, and also it was this two year period where I could really dive into art, like fine art I guess—like quotations—and see if that was something that I really wanted to do. I picked Parsons because...all the programs are sort of different in various ways

and Parsons is—a lot of the professors and their focus is on art's relationship to both the social and economic world, which is what interests me, right. So, it's like, you know, the art world isn't a bubble, it's influenced in—there's sort of this myth that the artist goes into a cabin in solitude or something and creates this masterpiece—that's absolutely not true. It's definitely influenced by their experiences as a person, what kind of person, culturally and economically, their experiences influence that thing. I liked the art program at Parsons because of that. They were very much like, yes, this is what it is. At the time that I was there, I was making a lot of videos, mostly about being queer, about this idea of otherness and queerness as, in a way a relationship to monstrosity, but monstrosity being a liberatory idea. And I'm still interested in those things. I haven't, since I graduated, I haven't really made that much work. I think it's time, right. Instead, I'm working lots of shitty jobs to pay rent. But yeah, my art has kind of shifted to just a drawing practice. So just a daily drawing practice. And I currently work on this project called Unbag, which is um—it's a pretty esoteric, small art magazine, but it focuses on art and politics and I'm an editor for that magazine, so that's fun for me. And that feels like more of an art practice where I get to, in a way, collaborate with artists and curate this magazine so that it sort of feels like it talks about where the art world is or where art can be in a contemporary way and its relationship to politics and so that's sort of—I'm not actively, I don't really actively make a lot of things that I—that I would show in any way. I'm also not super interested in showing artwork in that way or selling—I don't know, I don't think I've ever sold an art piece ever [laughter] in that way, because I'm not a painter or anything like that. But I still really like art. I think, yeah, I don't know, it's another way of thinking through the world and thinking through theory and experiences and stuff like that. But yeah, I'm not—I'm no longer interested in being an artist with a capital A, I guess.

Smith: How did you shift to the—the queer self—defense scenes?

Mendez: Yeah, so when I—basically when I finished school, grad school here—In my past I've sort of dabbled in boxing and kickboxing. I've taken a class here and there blah blah blah, for a month in Austin or whatever, but I've always kind of liked the sport of Muay Thai and MMA. And so, when I graduated, I was like—I just want to do something, something physical maybe, and something that's fun and something that's learned. So, I went to this gym in Bushwick. It was a Muay Thai gym. And so, Muay Thai is similar to kickboxing, it's the national sport of Thailand, and it's like where kickboxing sort of relates to—so a lot of people use them interchangeably, but technically they're different just because of rule sets and—and points as far as the sport goes. So, it was a Muay Thai gym, they also had Brazilian jiu-jitsu which is a grappling sport and I just got really into it. I went and I really liked it. I—at the time, I was searching—I wanted to learn some sort of self-defense, but I've also always been interested in the sport so it seemed like a perfect thing to do, right I could learn a little bit of self-defense but I still could enjoy this sport and have this thing to look forward to and be active in a way. And so, I started training both of those: Muay Thai and jiu-jitsu, and still continue to train them today. Since being in the scene a little bit, you come to realize that all gyms are pretty shitty. They're very macho, obviously I don't like that. The gym, I went to lucky enough, it was run—the head coach was a queer woman of color, which is very rare, [laughter] and yeah, she's amazing, and we became, she's one of my best friends now. But I just got lucky in that I landed in this—I just so happened to land in this place and it just became a thing where I—especially given the moment that we're in, where the right is not only—

gets away with violence, like blatant violence towards anyone different, but it's in a way encouraged by many of—by many politicians and many politics now [door closes] it seems. I would love it if queer and trans people had more access to these martial arts because I do think that there's—there's many good benefits, right. So, self-defense is definitely one of them, but also a physical connection with your body that trans people don't get to have, there's a way that you connect with it when you strengthen it and learn to move in weird ways that maybe you wouldn't normally going about your everyday, right, so sitting and standing and walking up the subway steps. And then also just mental health stuff—um, I think that there's science for it, obviously, but I mean it really is a good way to sort of learn to problem solve and to feel encouraged and good about the things that you accomplished and so for those reasons, mental health and physical awareness and then self-defense, I would love people to have more access to it. Martial arts gyms are very expensive, which in a way I'm like, OK I get it, because people train for many years to accumulate this knowledge but also under capitalism everything...

Smith: Accessibility, et cetera, et cetera,

Mendez: Yeah, exactly, and because of the cultures that tend to be created in them—even if queer and trans people could access these things monetarily they wouldn't want to. So, I'm interested in building communities that offer that. So, uh now I—I have this little, I don't know, project I guess, called queer fight school, and it's just an Instagram basically [laughter]. Well, so I have this Instagram that I run where hopefully it's like a connecting point for people and then aside from that I teach, or at least I taught, now that I'm moving, but I teach self-defense classes or intro classes to Muay Thai, intro classes to jiu-jitsu that are donation based or free, um, so that people can access these things. And then most recently, I created a couple of zines that are like introductory self-defense zines and kind of used again, the project name queer fight school as the name for the zines that I was making, or for the table that I was selling these zines at. So, that's most recently what I've been doing with that project, and I hope to continue it in in Texas, because I think everywhere needs it would be great.

Smith: What kind of spaces were you able to hold those introductory classes in? Where did you get your funding for the zines? Like do you pay for those yourself, all the printing and...?

Mendez: Yeah, [laughter] so again, because that gym that I was at—the woman who was the head coach—she was obviously very into letting me use that gym space. She would eventually leave that gym space, and so I left that gym as well and so for a while I had a really nice gym space and I just used it when the classes weren't going so it was like a late Friday night or something when there wasn't a class, but was able to get quite a few people to come because I do think that there's an interest. People are like, yeah, I do feel unsafe a lot and would love to just know even the basic things. Um, when that space—when I no longer had that space, I found this space, it's called Otion Front Studios, it's in Bushwick. It's a collective—most people use it—it's a collective performance space, and I think the people that use it the most are often dancers. But it's this little, it's crazy, it's this little shed in the back—you heard? [laughter] —of someone's apartment slash storefront, wherever. It's right on the corner on Myrtle, and it's actually very nice. It's—it's got soft floors, which is necessary in martial arts—it's really helpful in martial arts, and they also

have mirrors, which again I think is a dance thing but that's really good for when practicing, for beginners to look at themselves as they learn how to punch and stuff, they can look at themselves in the mirror and see their form. So, I've used that space since I left the gym, and I've also been involved with this group called Pop Gym, which is based here in New York, and they do workshops for—like martial arts and self-defense workshops. They're a non-profit, but it's run by fairly radical people—I think they decided to make a non-profit just so they could maybe benefit from applying for certain grants and stuff like that. So, I teach with them, I'm technically on their board or something, but again it's so informal that it's very—it's just like a center of friends, right. So, people normally reach out to them and it's normally women's shelters, or we've done one at the Brooklyn LGBTQ center. So, people normally reach out to them, so in that instance we go, and we do it in the space that they provide in those buildings, which is normally an empty room like this, yeah, they just push tables to the side and stuff like that. So those spaces have been sort of just random I guess but...

Smith: Uh, what was the name of the first gym—not the first, but the other gym that you went to?

Mendez: Yeah, so I started at this gym in Bushwick it was called Physical Culture Collective. It was owned by this dude named Gavin [Gavin Van Vlack], who's in the hardcore punk scene, which I think also kind of drew me to that gym because it's like, oh this is a gym for misfits and blah blah blah. He's kind of a douchebag [laughter] which is not surprising, which is why the coach, who I—my coach would eventually leave that gym. And once she wasn't there, there was no point in me being there, so since then, I personally train at—I've been to other gyms. Right now, I train at this gym called Bancho MMA. Again it's like, it's not a place where I would take a queer or trans person who is interested in trying it out because culturally it's pretty shitty, but for me I feel comfortable enough and that I've been in the sport enough that I can hang with these people and I'm—that I'm used to it. Uh, and so I go there because the training is good, and not necessarily because the people are amazing, though there are some really great people. But I feel like, because I can handle that, I go and I train and I try to train with the best people that I can so that when I teach I'm providing the best information that I can in these other spaces. It would be nice if one day those two things were the same and overlapped, but unfortunately, they aren't right now, but hopefully one day. [laughter]

Smith: Can you say more about being a queer trans person in those spaces that aren't necessarily welcoming to...?

Mendez: Yeah, I mean it's totally understandable—I think, understandable as to why trans people, why queer people wouldn't want to be in these spaces—Um, aside from the machismo that often exists in them, unfortunately, it's kind of a catch 22. Unfortunately, martial arts, for example Muay Thai, it requires punching and kicking and getting pushed a little, under the right coach, you won't get hurt training these things, like you would never be in an unsafe way, but you do have to push yourself to an extent to be uncomfortable—

Smith: Yeah

Mendez: Um, and that's not always easy for people right, especially a group of people that would have experienced violence in many forms, and likely physical violence at some point in their life. It's not easy to be in a place where that happens, and then for jiu-jitsu, because it's a grappling sport, it—it mostly takes place on the ground and it's uh—there's no striking, but it's mostly like joint locks and chokes and so because of them you're in close proximity and in an intimate way, not really—not really sexual, at least, that's the hope, is that—that people don't sexualize it. But often—again, that's another thing, right, so shitty men can use these particular positions or situations to—to be shitty men. But even with the right partners, even in the safest space, it requires being close to someone and touching someone, maybe in ways that you aren't comfortable with, or possibly getting touched in ways that you aren't comfortable with, even if it isn't in a sexual or like a predatory way, so that's really hard for people and I think that there needs to be a lot that goes into building safety in the space before that can even be done. So, I think I just got lucky that the initial gym I was at I felt pretty safe and was able to start that. And now that I'm—I know a little bit more, I have the confidence to create boundaries that I think are safe right, so if—if I know that someone is shitty in jiu-jitsu, I—I don't—when you like spar roll, like spar, that's called rolling with them, because you're just rolling around [laughter] and that's so clever. But basically, if there's someone I don't want to roll with, I'm confident enough to be like, I'm not gonna fucking roll with you, you're a maniac, you know, or I hate you or something like that.

Smith: [laughter] yeah.

Mendez: But for someone who's new to it, it's very easy to be like, oh, OK I don't know what I'm doing, like sure, blah blah blah and—and not feel confident in yourself to create those boundaries. Or if someone's being wacky or out of control to be like, you're being bonkers right now you need to stop doing that because you're gonna hurt someone. Maybe you don't have the knowledge or confidence to do that, so I think my ability to be in those spaces currently is definitely just from having a safe space in the beginning to learn what was appropriate and what wasn't appropriate, and I credit a lot of that to my coach, um, who, her name is Naomi, and I really appreciated the way that she ran PCC [Physical Culture Collective], the first gym that I went to because it was kind of a no bullshit thing and she demanded respect—obviously didn't always get it because she herself is this small woman and men are trash sometimes so... But yeah, I mean I credit the little voice in my head that's like, be confident and set those boundaries, like that's definitely her voice, I think so...

Smith: That's great.

Mendez: Yeah.

Smith: So, can you tell me about the shitty jobs that you had to be working? [laughter]

Mendez: [laughter] Oh man, I mean, just—I think all jobs are kinda shitty, right, a job is a job. But I've gotten lucky enough to where I have gotten to teach here, I teach at Parsons as an adjunct,

and that's really fun. [chair squeaking] I think—I really love education and learning and being able to help maybe some way people learn something or even create a better—think about creating a better, safer classroom. Um, but unfortunately, since it's an adjunct position, I teach like one class a semester, and that doesn't pay anything. So, man, all the jobs. I mean I've done everything. I've been a barista, I've worked in retail, I've—I've worked at a lot of tattoo shops, just like back of house and front of house, but what that means is I just schedule appointments or I'm cleaning. So even though it was kind of fun because it's a little bit of an informal workspace and I'm around artists, and I ended up making a lot of friends who tattoo, so that was nice being around friends, but it was also just kind of a shitty job where you just clean a lot and deal with like entitled customers a lot which is never fun, so yeah. A lot of those... jobs.

Smith: What um—were certain positions more queer- or trans-friendly than others? Did you ever have any issues at like—with any of your positions or workplaces with your identity?

Mendez: Yeah, I mean I think any sort of service industry job is pretty shitty, like even if you have the best bosses or co-workers, which I feel like I've been very luck actually. Everywhere I've been, as far as the people that have hired me or the people that I've worked with, no one has been particularly shitty, and I definitely have some friends who have had people harass them, and I've just been very lucky in that sense. But, because it's a service industry job, it's like no matter what, you're dealing with the public and people who—people of all kinds, right, who aren't necessarily very nice to everyone or yeah, who don't have the best intentions. I think honestly, it can oftentimes be less about being queer or trans and just more about people thinking they're better than people that serve them. So, um, I would say that that was by far the biggest issue and I think that's very common for everyone, right. It's like, if you clean up after me, you're less than me but I don't know, obviously that's bullshit so...

Smith: Definitely. Have like your employers and the people that you've worked with been respectful of your different identities? How's that been—is it like hard to explain to people?

Mendez: Yeah, I think that honestly, I think I've just ended up in...I've been lucky, yeah. So, I've always—I've gotten to work for friends or friends of friends and because of that employers and co-workers know what they're getting into. When I worked as a barista, it was my friend—it was my friend that ran the cafe, and it was a lovely work experience, as far as with her and the other co-workers, maybe not always so much with people who are demanding coffee. And when I worked at the tattoo shops, there were trans tattoo artists so that was really cool, and the owner of the one that I worked at the longest, which is Three Kings, it's this—there's two locations, I worked at the one in Green Point—um, he was really chill, like very sweet, he's actually very sweet to me all the time, always really respectful of my gender and yeah. I mean I think again, there's a culture in—I mean, you can't ever really escape machismo and misogyny, so it's not like those things didn't happen, obviously there's—because the tattoo world is dominated by men, it's like, yeah, people would say shit that is fucked up, mostly about women, usually not about trans people, in particular about being trans but I mean trans people are women too, so it's like all these assumptions and things, they leak into it, even though it's not maybe explicitly saying shit. So there was a—yeah I mean, there was definitely people that would say shit and yeah I

guess it's complicated right, in that way, but as a—as a worker I didn't experience any direct violence or harassment particular to me and who I was and again I think I'm very lucky in that sense.

Smith: When you are teaching class, you're at Parsons, how are students with that? Um, are they like respectful or...?

Mendez: Yeah, it's honestly—it's hit or miss [laughter]. I mean not that they're not respectful. And I also think it's—it's changing, right, as queer and trans identities become more public, and are in mainstream forms, right, so pride is getting filmed, right, the pride parade is going to be shown publicly and stuff, and RuPaul's Drag Race is on VH1 now [laughter] and stuff...

Smith: [laughter]

Mendez: Um, yeah so I remember the first year that I taught, so this has—this has been my fourth year teaching—the first semester that I taught, you know, of course the first day, I don't know if you've had this experience but the first day of class is always a throw away class, basically you introduce the syllabus, you introduce who you are, maybe you do an icebreaker, blah blah blah. And so, I always say my, you know, my—these are my pronouns blah blah blah, and I put it in the syllabus and then I go around and I ask people to say their pronouns and blah blah blah. And so, a lot of people, I remember, the first semester people were like, what? like very confused. And I don't know, you just do your best I think, because it's an art class, I get to maybe approach things in a different way and I get to share queer artists and trans artists which is fun. But honestly even over these past four years I think I've had less and less people give me the confused look and I don't know if maybe people are just better about looking less confused or... [laughter]

Smith: [laughter]

Mendez: Or maybe, you know, hopefully people are familiar. Maybe they know what it means to—even if they don't experience it or have practice in asking for people's pronouns or giving their own, they at least know what I'm saying or what I mean by that. Um, I also think—even though—I definitely—I mean I definitely have critiques of the New School and Parsons, I will say that, maybe it's because we're in New York, I know that a lot of faculty are queer, are trans—like my boss at Parsons is trans. So, it—I don't know, maybe there's something in that, maybe it's particular to the school and in some way, somehow, I don't know.

Smith: Cool. Earlier you mentioned obviously about your places that closed down or people left—how has New York changed since you got here?

Mendez: Yeah, that's wild. It has changed a lot, which is kind of funny, because I feel like I haven't been here that long, and I don't know, I think any sort of DIY or punk venue is something that doesn't last forever, right. Even growing up in Houston like that shit doesn't last, but I will say that, I don't know it's—I don't know, it's very sad, but I guess it's just something you get used to. Like I think the closing of Silent Barn was really—was really a sad thing. It was one of the—when

I came to New York to visit, to see if it was where I wanted to live and to go on an interview or whatever for the school, one of the first places a friend brought me to was Silent Barn, which was really cool, and it really was a hub for queer/trans punk music and queer and trans identities. They had—I think that probably the people that ran it were all, almost all queer, probably, many trans. Um, and then I've just gotten to see gentrification at a new level in New York because, though it happens everywhere—it does happen everywhere, but it's at lightning speed in New York.

Smith: Yeah, it's so noticeable.

Mendez: Yeah, and it's wild right. When I first moved to New York I was in Crown Heights. I basically—I lived off of the Utica stop and kind of at the end of the—the 4 line, and I was only there for like 2 years, and in those two years, like one stop over, I think it's Franklin or something, it was revamped. It had a fancy grocery store, and it had—right now because I have friend that lives near there I recently went and there's this crazy condo being built and I'm like, who can even fucking afford that? Um, and that's all happened in the time that I've been here, like that street has completely changed since I've been here which again, I've been here for a very short time, 6 years I think, 7 years maybe, and that is just so crazy to see an entire street, I don't know, change in that short of time, yeah I don't know.

Smith: So, you're moving back to Texas—what's the plan?

Mendez: What is the plan? That's a good [laughter] that's a good question!

Smith: [laughter]

Mendez: I don't know, I'm moving back because my—my dad passed away like a month ago and I'm moving back to help out my mom a little bit. My dad was sick for quite a while, he had dementia, a particular kind of dementia called Lewy bodies dementia. Um, so he was sick for a while, so it—it wasn't a surprise when he passed away but it was this thing that happened—that was going on for a long time and my mom's been through a lot because of that and I don't think that my brothers support her in the way that she needs support, because they have their own families and shit and so I get that. So I'm going back to be closer to her and to help her out and hopefully be like a support system as she transitions into this new part of her life, which unfortunately is being a widow and navigating the world as like a—a single person, a single unit right. So I'm actually going to go—oh god—I'm gonna go live with her for a couple weeks, until I can find a place in Austin again because again, I just—I love her and I want—I want to be there for her, but I don't think I can—I don't really wanna be in the same city, like there needs to be a sort of 2-hour, 3-hour buffer where I can be there...

Smith: Have your own space...

Mendez: Yeah, I can be there in less than a day, I can get to you in less than a day and I can help you out and be there whenever you need me, but I also need to just navigate my own life. Um, I

just turned 30 so I'm like—[sighs] [laughter] what am I doing? So yeah, I'm both—I'm excited—because New York is so hard I feel like my time here is good, like I'm ready to leave. This past winter I was like, OK, I'm ready to get out of here. I'm not sure if I really want to return to Texas just yet, I would like to experience other places to live and do things but maybe this is just an interim until I figure out what's next so... we'll see. [laughter]

Smith: OK, so is there anything else you want to add or cover or talk about?

Mendez: Um, I don't think so [laughter] is that OK?

Smith: Oh yeah that was great! Yeah!

Mendez: OK cool. [laughter] OK good.

Smith: [laughter] No, thank you so much.

Mendez: Yeah, I appreciate it.