Michelle O’Brien: Hello. My name is Michelle O’Brien, and I will be having a conversation with Phoenix Danger for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library’s Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is April 24, [2017] and this is being recorded at the NYU Department of Sociology. Hello!

Phoenix Danger: Hi.

O’Brien: Tell me about your childhood.

Danger: Hmm, my childhood, okay. Wow, we really jumped right into it. Well, I was born in—I was born in Flushing, Queens in 1990. My parents are both Filipino immigrants who met in New York City at some point in the 80’s. I lived in Queens for ages zero through one—

O’Brien: Can I ask you some questions about your parents?

Danger: Yeah, absolutely.

O’Brien: When did they immigrate?

Danger: They immigrated—you know, I really need to get the exact number—like, the exact years for this, but in the early 80’s.

O’Brien: So, there was a lot going on in the Philippines in the early 80’s.

Danger: Yes.

O’Brien: Do you know what motivated their immigration?

Danger: Actually, that’s funny. That’s what my undergraduate thesis was about! Yeah, so, in the—in the, like, late 70’s, early 80’s, in the Philippines, there was the collapse of the [Ferdinand] Marcos dictatorship. Part of the reason—so, my parents kind of came for different reasons. My mom came—she told me—and they have, like, a little bit of a different class background—my mom came—what she told me was just that she had friends who would come—who would, like, graduate college, come to work here, and she would come visit them. I think she might’ve had dual citizenship? No. She did not, never mind. But she would come to visit them, and, you know, she didn’t know what she wanted to do in Manila, and New York—or, I think, California at the time—was more exciting, and, sort of, like, she saw more opportunities there, so she immigrated to California.

O’Brien: And what was her class background?
**Danger:** She was, I would say, middle class to upper middle class. I think my dad was like, middle class to lower middle class. Yeah. And then my dad immigrated because the Philippines had become dangerous for him, and he sort of experienced, like, violent crime, and so his parents told him that you have to leave. And so he immigrated to Miami with his brothers.

**O’Brien:** And then how did they meet?

**Danger:** How did they meet? You know what, it’s interesting. They both told me that they just sort of—they started just moving. Like, my mom just moved across the country, and my dad started moving north. And they were both looking for somewhere that they just wanted to settle, and they both ended up in Manhattan.

**O’Brien:** So, tell me about growing up in Flushing.

**Danger:** Yeah, so I—

**O’Brien:** Or, you were just there until three?

**Danger:** Until—yeah, until one.

**O’Brien:** Until one! Oh.

**Danger:** It was very—it was pretty brief. You know, my parents had lived there for a couple of years already. So, yeah. I—after Flushing, we moved to Manhattan—First [Avenue] and 72nd [Street]—and then to First [Avenue] and 63rd [Street]. And then I lived there until I was eight, and then we moved to the suburbs. I don’t know. I always think that growing up in New York City really—or just having my very first, you know, my first eight years in New York City, was really interesting, because it sort of forms your expectations for what the rest of the world is going to be like. And, sort of, when I got out to the suburbs, I was like, “Wow, this is really different. Like, where are all the people? I can’t sleep at night because it’s too quiet. The crickets sound scary. I don’t really know what’s out there. It’s not city sounds.” And I was just—I was just talking to someone recently about—I think it’s very indicative what the two—the differences between the two experiences, because I recently looked at my second grade class picture and my third grade class picture, and my family had moved over the summer. And my second grade class picture, teachers included, there were maybe, like, three white people, and everyone else was various forms of people of color, because sort of the—that part of the Upper East Side wasn’t really as bougie as it is now. Like, a lot—just, a lot of people of color, from a lot—I don’t know. Like, a lot of kids of—children of immigrants. And I guess, probably—since we were zoned by district, I guess all of these people of various ethnicities all lived in the Upper East Side, which is something that I can’t imagine right now. And then when I got to my third grade class picture, it was, like, the total opposite. It was, you know—I was, like, one of three people of color.

**O’Brien:** Why did your parents move?
Danger: I think that they wanted more space. They wanted to have another kid, which they did. I think that they wanted to give—I also think that they wanted to give us something different. I mean, the school district was really good, that I know. I think they wanted us to grow up with more space in the house, more air, a backyard. And then, like, I think that they probably just wanted to have a house, you know? They—I mean, I think that they were some of the last people that—you know, obviously with like, class advantages factored in—were able to work a lot and move from Queens to Manhattan to the suburbs. And so, I’ve never had this conversation with them, but I speculate that it probably felt good to be able to, like, immigrate, and work for 20 years, and then get a house.

O’Brien: What kind of work did they do?

Danger: So, my mom—my mom was an import manager in the fashion industry. She moved between a couple of different companies, but she, like, always worked on Seventh Avenue. And my dad, like, initially, when he moved to New York, got a job on the sales floor of Tiffany & Company and worked his way into corporate. They do really different stuff now. I don’t know if that’s important to this part of the interview. They do really different stuff right now. Sometime around when I was 16—I mean, it seems like there was a lot of—like, there’s a lot of overworking to the point of maybe abuse in the fashion industry, which maybe is not surprising. So, my mom quit her job. My dad also quit his job to start his own company, which does outsourcing for medical transcriptions. And so my mom helped him with that. And so now my dad still does that, and my mom—I think—works import-exports for a steel company. Yeah.

O’Brien: Did she go to college—or, did either of them go to college?

Danger: They both went to college in the Philippines. My mom went to Ateneo [de Manila University], which is sort of like, one of the two most prominent universities. And then my dad went to the University of San Sebastian, which is another school that I actually don’t know that much about.

O’Brien: And what were you like as a kid?

Danger: Serious. [laughter] I was a really—yeah, I was a really serious kid. I—I don’t know. I had friends—I was a tomboy. I was a serious tomboy. All of my friends were boys. I think that—you know, like, I think that there was something interesting going on for me as a tomboy, where there was something—even though my parents weren’t thrilled, they were like, “Whatever. Just put on a dress on Sunday, and we’re going to go to church.” But there was definitely something interesting going on where it was like, in order to be able to express myself in a boyish way, I had to really renounce a lot of femininity, to the point where it was like, saying that it was stupid, you know? And I was like—it’s kind of like the child equivalent of women who have friends that’re only men because “women are too dramatic” or, you know, something like that. But like, I hated pink. I hated dresses.
I also felt embarrassed a lot about, like, engaging in girly things. Like, I felt embarrassed about learning hand games, and so I don’t know any of those, and sometimes it still comes up, even though I’m almost thirty. But, yeah. I played mostly with boys, I was athletic—yeah. I guess—yeah, I guess that’s kind of—I don’t remember a lot of my childhood, you know? I was, like, trying to figure out a way to talk around that, but I think I’m comfortable with saying that I don’t remember a lot of my childhood. I think probably particularly around gender stuff, some of it was traumatic, and I just sort of wiped it out. But—I don’t know. I was a kid with a lot of feelings. I cried a lot. And that really actually continued, like, all throughout the rest of my life. I cry a lot now. I might cry sometime in the next hour. We’ll see what happens! But yeah, that’s kind of, like, what it was up until sort of my adolescence, which is when I start to remember things more, and then also sort of when being gender non-conforming became more problematic.

O’Brien: Tell me about the period in your life when the memories start fleshing out.

Danger: Yeah. Hmmm. You know what, I think that one of the first—something that really stands out is when I had a first acknowledged crush on a girl. And I also was having sort of, like, misplaced crushes on boys at the time. I do identify as, like, queer or bisexual now, but I think that the crushes I had on boys at that point were, you know, heterosexually coercive. Yeah. So, I had a crush on my best friend.

O’Brien: How old were you?

Danger: I was probably, like—why did we go to high school together? She lived in a different district. Oh, I think it’s just—the high school I went to was, like, better or something. Anyway, we went to middle school together, so I was probably, like, fifteen. Yeah. I was probably fifteen. We were in the same English class, which was an advanced English class. I don’t know what caught my eye. I mean, we were—because I feel like I don’t know if we were friends at this point. I think that we were friends of friends, and that she would sit in the front of the English class, because that’s the kind of person that she was, and I would sit in the back, because that’s the kind of person that I was, and still am. Even though they tell you to get better about it during college, I just didn’t. And I just remember her knowing the answers to everything, and me feeling really impressed and excited about it. Everyone I’ve dated since then has been very much like that. [Laughter] Yeah, I don’t know, and I think besides—I think besides finding a way to direct my desire in a way that felt truthful and fulfilling and also terrifying, is when also I started feeling more, I guess, maybe intellectually fulfilled. Which I think is because they started, you know—they started, like, stratifying the classes according to ability, which of course is fucked up, and I did benefit from it. I began to—I just began to become interested in the things around me, and I don’t know if I was that interested in the things around me before that. I guess—yeah, and then also, I think something else that was happening was that people were giving me feedback that I was good at things. And so I think that that began to sort of, like, shape a consciousness of what I could do and who I could be, and who I could potentially be with even though I hated myself. Yeah, no, I think that, you know, when I first—when I started to really develop an identity and ideas for the future is when I really started becoming more present in my own life.
O’Brien: Where in the suburbs were you, again?

Danger: I was in Rockland County—

O’Brien: Rockland County, okay.

Danger: —which is—a lot of people don’t know it. A lot of people are like, “You were upstate. You lived upstate,” but it’s actually the southernmost point of New York state without being New York City. So, that is where I grew up.

O’Brien: So, anything more from high school that you wanted—that you want to share, or feel is important to you?

Danger: Yeah, definitely. I was a gay outcast. So, I—I don’t know, I was very lucky. I ended up dating this person who I had a crush on. Yeah! [Laughter] We played—I mean, we were both nerds in, like, every way that you could be, so we ended up—she played the cello, I played the clarinet and the bass clarinet, and we played in the pit together for Les Miserables, which was very ambitious—even I thought so at the time—for a high school musical. I began to become interested in journalism. That’s completely different from the direction that I was going in. So I was—it’s interesting. I was gay-slash-bisexual in a way that I’m not now. I was bisexual in the way where it was like, “I’m not a gay! That would be ridiculous! Like, I still—” And also, it was in 2006, which is not that long ago, and also in a suburb of New York City, but it really felt like I had no future as, you know, a lesbian or a gay person. I felt really angry at myself. I was like, “Now you can’t have a life. Now you can’t, you know, have, I guess, a husband and kids?” Even though I, as like, a child and an adolescent, was never someone who thought about, or even pictured myself, really, getting married or having kids, which actually is different now, but was never part of my formative consciousness.

O’Brien: Fantasies still weigh on us in one way or another.

Danger: Exactly. Absolutely. And also, I think that that was—I don’t know. It really was a time before a lot of, I guess, lesbian representation. And, this is so fucked up when I think about it, but I was kind of like, “I’m not a lesbian! Lesbians are—“ and I would think things like “fat,” or, you know, “butch,” and “ugly” and—this one was really specific, I don’t know how I knew this, but I was like, “wear Birkenstocks.” And I was like, why did—in my mind now, I’m like, “Why did I already know that? Was something just in my DNA?” I eventually—I definitely did end up being masculine-of-center, and, like, not fatphobic. But, yeah, that was really weird. And then Tegan and Sara were becoming really popular, and they sort of became somewhat people who I could imagine myself being like, and they also had a lot of fans who I felt were like myself. And so, I—

O’Brien: Okay, so you were talking about Tegan and Sara.

Danger: Yeah. So I was talking about Tegan and Sara—

O’Brien: Yeah.
Danger: I was talking about Tegan and Sara—yeah, so, I sort of—I began to identify with them and then also with a lot of their fans, and—this is funny or a little bit embarrassing, and I’m really trying to own it—I joined their fan web forum and became obsessed with it, because I was really—I was talking to—I guess at the time, the way we referred to ourselves was lesbians. And talking to these other people in different parts of the country, seeing how people dressed, seeing, like—most of the people were closeted, as I half-was. And we were also all applying to college, and so we were sort of on the brink of becoming more independent and out as queer. So there was really a lot of energy and also hormones. It was, like, everyone was so far away from each other, but we were also just, you know, queer. We weren’t saying that. We were like, “Lesbians! Other lesbians in the country!” and were sending each other pictures of ourselves and staying up on—like, chatting on webcams, which were very primitive! And, yeah, I remember I just didn’t care about anything else. And I remember I had an interview with Vassar [College] one morning, and I had just literally stayed up all night and couldn’t concentrate—did not care about Vassar, just cared about these people that I was really getting my first sense of community with. And I really took that with me to college, and actually, someone who I met there is my friend now—you know, lives in Brooklyn now, and some of these people, we do still see each other and we still talk. So, I don’t know, those are friendships that have lasted over ten years, and I think that that part of my life was—or, like, that experience in high school—I think that I would be a different person, yeah.

O'Brien: That’s lovely. So, you went off to college—

Danger: I went to college.

O'Brien: What was that like?

Danger: It was amazing. Well, it was amazing for, like, a year. I was immediately out. You know, I couldn’t wait. I just couldn’t wait. Oh, sorry, and actually going back to the high school situation, I think it’s also important to say that once I was sort of out and dating a girl, I was very excommunicated. I wasn’t really invited to friends’ houses anymore because my parents didn’t know, but their parents knew. And yeah, I—it’s so inappropriate! We were—a lot of staff and faculty would gossip about us or look at us in a certain way, and the GSA in the school did find me. I didn’t find them, they tracked me down, and they were like, “We think you need support,” and I was like, “Okay.” Yeah, I don’t know. So that’s significant, too, because that’s part of why finding community online seemed so natural to me. Yeah. So, anyway, I went to college. I was out immediately. All of the—I guess this is how we identified—all of the gay people just flocked together somehow within the first week of being in school. I had a lot of friends. I felt really popular. I wasn’t a loser anymore. I was attractive, which was weird. People found me attractive. I found other people attractive, and we weren’t, like, 3000 miles away, you know? I was having sex. I was drinking. I feel like there’s two ways of being a queer loser in high school, and one is that you don’t really have any friends—you’re not really connected to anything—or, like, a queer loser PoC in the suburbs. That’s really specific, but either you’re a loser or you become a punk for some reason, and you smoke and drink and whatever, but that wasn’t me. Yeah, and so I actually sort of embarked upon the beginnings of what I have realized now was a substance abuse problem. But before the
gravity of that was really sinking in, I was having a lot of fun. We were all gay. We were all drinking a lot. We were all going to the gay club every weekend on their 21—sorry, their 18 and over nights. You know, the academics were secondary. I didn’t do—I did okay. I got—I started college going to business school, which didn’t make any sense for me. I didn’t know—I mean, I wanted to study journalism, but ended up in business school because my dad wanted me to go there, and that made the most—I don’t know. Just, it was sort of like—my thinking was, “Okay, you’re good at writing, and that’s nice, but you want to have a livelihood, so you should go to business school.” And I was just naturally terrible at it. I really think, even if I hadn’t been partying, I would not have done well, and I think this thing happened to me. Okay, yeah, so this is the academic part: this thing happened to me freshman year where I had a gap in my schedule, and I had to fill it with a class, and I had registered late, because doing things late is part of my personality. So I’d registered late, and the only class that was left was a sociology class called “Views from the Third World” which—I don’t know what that class would be called now, actually. And there were people of color. There—one, the professor was rumored to have helped smuggle arms into some country in South America. I don’t know if that’s true or where that came from, but I’m sure that she was involved in some sort of activism or resistance, and that probably got blown up by college students.

O’Brien: An unspecified country?

Danger: Unspecified, yeah. I mean, there was definitely something racist about that, where people would be like, “South America.” Somewhere in South America. That’s all I know. So I was seduced by sociology, and that kind of created this internal dysfunction that really sort of carried me throughout the rest of my college career. And so I’d be in these business classes, which I hated and was bad at, and, you know, learning how to make money, learning how to sort of evade legal statutes that would allow me to be richer. People would be literally wearing suits to class, and then an hour and a half later I’d be in my sociology class and it would be like, “Advertising is destroying the world,” you know, “Property is theft”—just, you know, reading a lot of Karl Marx for the first time. And so, going back and forth was just like, “I don’t know which of these is real, but I think it’s not the business part.” And so that was sort of going into my sophomore year. In my sophomore year I got into an emotionally abusive—and, by the end, physically abusive—relationship, and, of course, that was really intense. A lot of things started happening at that point. A lot of the time, part of emotional abuse is separating you from your friends, and so I started to—I don’t know. I was lacking emotional support. I was angry at my parents for—you know, just because. Maybe for putting a capitalist agenda in my mind or something like that, but I was also thinking about coming out to them. I was failing my classes, because I was still in business school for some reason, and so I was failing all my classes. And over winter break, I came out to my parents, which did not go well. It was basically just, you know, screaming, name-calling, yeah. Just, like, all of that, and because I had been so out in college, I just didn’t—like, I could not abide by it. And so, one day my dad told me that I couldn’t go back to school because school was a bad influence on me, which I think meant that, “College is making you gay and you can’t go back.” And I just couldn’t do it anymore, and the person I was dating was in Texas for winter break, because that’s where she was from, and I borrowed a hundred dollars from my friend and I bought a plane ticket to Austin, and I got my friend to pick me up while my
dad was out picking up my brother from school, and I got on a plane. And I didn’t tell my parents. I didn’t talk to them for about six months. I was in Texas with my abuser, but also it was like—it’s like that thing about abuse where it’s like—I don’t know. You’re still having fun sometimes, or you’re still—I mean, it wasn’t fun but it felt like when there were other people around, it was a break from abuse. And also, we were drinking all the time, so that felt fun in some way. And, I think that I was still—you know, that was still a time where I was really indulging in—just not caring about the consequences of anything, and just trying to have fun and get fucked up. Get fucked up and have fun. And so we were doing drugs, getting drunk. We were down all the way by the border. She was, like—

O’Brien: How were you paying for it?

Danger: How was I paying for it? That’s a great question.

O’Brien: A hundred dollars doesn’t last long if you’re doing drugs.

Danger: No, a hundred dollars does not last long if you’re trying to do drugs. My girlfriend was rich. Yeah. And so, yeah, part of the abuse was also financial, but yeah, that’s what it was. And I think also, before my parents could catch onto it, I withdrew the rest of whatever was in my bank account, which was not much. But I withdrew it in cash while I was at the airport. And so I didn’t have a passport, and my girlfriend was crossing the border into Mexico, bringing back…. Xanax? Yeah. And so, we were doing that, blacking out. Everyone—she was rich, everyone was rich, so we were in these beautiful houses with, like, swimming pools, and just, you know, driving drunk to the club where you could still smoke inside. Yeah, and it felt like—it just felt wild and romantic, and—getting tattoos, also. I didn’t have money for that. And then I dropped out of school. I don’t know, because it was really expensive, and I had just started—the University of Maryland had a student union, and so I was starting to learn what student power was like, and I tried to start a student power at—I don’t know if I mentioned this. I went to American University, in DC—and so I kind of tried to start that, but with no organizing experience. I mean, I just—I couldn’t do it, you know? I was alone, and my girlfriend was pushing me—was just like, “You should just drop out of school. Like, you don’t need school. You don’t need to finish school,” and so I dropped out of school, and she finished school, and I started waiting tables. And I lived in DC for two more years before I moved back to New York and got my degree at Brooklyn College. I graduated last June. Yeah.

O’Brien: Congratulations.

Danger: Thank you.

O’Brien: How did you get out of the relationship?

Danger: Man, this is terrible. I cheated on her more than once, because I remember just feeling so desperate and unable to get out of it, and it was becoming increasingly physically threatening. And it was also horrible because we had just moved in together, and this was my first experience not living on my own. And so, I was cheating on her. She was also kind of cheating on me. Yeah. We broke up over the phone because she was in Texas, and I was scheduled to fly down to Texas, and we were going to drive back up
with our stuff together so that we could move in. And we did do that. We did drive back up together from Texas, but she was staying somewhere else—I think with the person who she had immediately started seeing—and then one day she just came in with her parents—and, like I mentioned, they were rich, so all of our furniture was theirs—and they took, you know—I mean, they took everything. They took our bed, our dresser, our couch. She was paying most of the rent in the room, and so we had to rent that room out, and then I moved all my stuff down to the living room and was sleeping in a pile of blankets, but I was out of the relationship and I just remember feeling such relief. And I was like, "I will sleep on the floor. I don't care. I will sleep in the living room, I will sleep on the floor, because now I am—I am free," and also, this has unleashed my chronic depression, which has probably been sitting in my body, like, waiting for something to come up. And that's how I—yeah, that's how I got out of the relationship.

O'Brien: So, you were waiting tables in DC, you had dropped out of college, and then you moved to New York?

Danger: Yeah.

O'Brien: What year was that?

Danger: It was December of 2011. Yeah.

O'Brien: And you had saved up money waiting tables to move, or, dad, or—

Danger: Somehow, no, yeah. So, I—even though I was making a lot of money, did not save any money, like—

O'Brien: It's easy to do.

Danger: —like, easy to do especially if you are drinking every night after you get out of work with your coworkers. I don't know if you've ever worked in the service industry, but people drink a lot. People drink a lot when they're waiting tables. Drinking, doing drugs, taking cabs home—would just make it home at the end of the night and wake up, and then be like, "I spent $200 last night," regularly. And so, luckily, I had gotten back in touch with my parents at this point, and my parents still live in Rockland, so I guess they wanted me to be closer. And so they helped me sublet an apartment, which was great, because I didn't need to put down a first and last month's rent, it was just, like, rent as I went. I got a job here. I had a job interview the day after I moved.

O'Brien: What kind of job?

Danger: I was working in food service again, and I ended up—yeah, I was dispatching deliveries in a now-defunct pizza place. And I had worked in a pizza place before, when I was in DC. Yeah, and so I started making money immediately, and so I was able to make rent, and then after that—well, my parents were still helping me put down money for stuff, and I think that actually, my most recent move was the only one that I've been able to do by myself. And so I was definitely—you know, it's definitely tight for my parents, but I'm really, really lucky in that they're able to help me.
O'Brien: And had they come around on queer stuff or did they just agree to just tune it out, or what?

Danger: You know, what we never talk about is the couple of months that we weren’t talking. So, we don’t talk about that, but other than that, they’ve very much come around. Well, they’ve come around to what I’ve told them. And so they’re welcoming to my partners—like, they’re never voicing wishes for anything else. I don’t know. I would say that maybe they’re almost proud of me at this point, but, you know? At the very least, they’re cool with it. They are mistaken about my identity, mostly because I have omitted that in the conversations that we’ve had, because I don’t know if they are ready for what being non-binary trans is, and they/them pronouns, and me having a different name than what they gave me. Though I did have an interesting experience with my mom, who really, really loves my partner. And my mom has become—since Trump was elected, my mom has become more politicized, has more of an identity as an immigrant now, has—I don’t know that she uses the term “women of color.” I think she probably says “minority,” but has more—is more connected to our identity that way. And so we went to a rally. She had never been to a rally before, and she took me. She was like, “I’m going to this,” and I was like, “Aw, I’m working, I’m really sorry, I can’t make it,” you know, “Here’s what I find helpful if I’m going to a rally or march,” and then I was like, “Actually, will you—maybe you could go with someone. Is there anyone you could go with?” and she was like, “I could go with you,” and so I was like, “Okay!” [laughter] “I will get the day off.” So I got the day off, and so, post-march, having dinner with my mom, and my partner is explaining pronouns and gender-neutral pronouns. And we had checked in before and made sure that this was okay. And—

O’Brien: Does your partner use gender-neutral pronouns, or were you talking about it abstractly, or—?

Danger: No, we were—I guess we were talking about getting more involved in activism. And my partner was talking about pronouns in those spaces? I don’t remember how we got, exactly, on that topic. But before that, I was kind of mentioning—like, thinking about having my parents use my pronouns, and so we were kind of—we were kind of tiptoeing into that because I didn’t want to bring it up, and she was open to bringing it up. And so she was like—her name is Lena [Solow]—and so Lena was saying, you know, “We go around the room, we say what pronouns we identify with,” so my mom was like, “Okay,” so she turns to Lena and says, “So, you use—?” and Lena says, “She and her,” and my mom turns to me and goes, “So, you use… he?” [laughter] Which was probably the most accepting iteration of the gender binary that I’ve ever seen. It was very touching. And I was like, “Well, you know, actually I use they,” and my mom looks at me and stops for a second, and she’s thinking. And she—the first words out of her mouth were, “I like ze better,” and I was like, “What? Where did you even hear that?” but I was like, “I don’t.” And so, whatever. My mom still uses she and her pronouns for me, but now when—if she’s ever around my friends, and particularly when she’s around my partner, other people are more free to use they pronouns, and so that’s kind of—that’s where we are at the moment.

O’Brien: So you were working pizza delivery as a dispatcher. How long did you do that?
Danger: Probably about a year and a half.

O'Brien: Yeah, and did you start another job after that, or...?

Danger: What was I doing after that? I was probably waiting tables somewhere else. I wonder, what was I doing? No. I got a job at a coffee shop, which was somewhere in between a Starbucks and an “independent”—I’m doing air quotes right now—an “independent” coffee shop. The coffee was terrible, and I had to work their—I worked the morning shift. It was like, you could either work nine hours in the morning or 10 hours at night—those were the only two shifts—so I worked nine hours in the morning. I was not suited for it. I had to be on my way to the train at a little bit before five in the morning, which was scary for me, because I lived 10 minutes from the train and stuff would happen. The police once slowed down to my walking speed and were just driving alongside me for, like, a block and a half, and when I finally stopped, they were following me because they thought that I was a minor, and that maybe I was unhoused or something? I don’t know, but I was like, “Why did I have to ask you, you know? Why did you scarily follow me at the crack of dawn for a block and a half without saying anything?” That’s, you know, ridiculous. And so I didn’t like that, and I applied to Babeland. And I got the job. I applied to Babeland, I got the job, I was like—you know, I kind of knew all the way through the interview process. I was like, “This is going to happen.” And around that time I also got offered a job at The Pleasure Chest, and I chose Babeland because the schedule was more flexible.

O'Brien: So, I want to ask a lot of questions about Babeland.

Danger: Yeah, yeah, definitely.

O'Brien: But let’s get a handle on—when did you start shifting into identifying as non-binary trans?

Danger: Oh, right! Yeah. I mean, I feel so lucky, because sort of in the same way that I came to college and was immediately, like, fun and popular and gay, somehow all of the friends that I made—the first friend group that I made when I was in New York were all non-binary transmasculine people. No idea how that happened—like, really no idea how that happened. Or, actually, it was—no. That’s—you know what? That’s not true. That was definitely erasing of the work that—like, my relationships with femmes. Because two things were happening. So, whatever, I was friends with the boys, and then also I was doing organizing at Brooklyn College. I was in the student union. There was a very strong student union that was mostly queer femmes. And I really like to think that—well, okay. So, there was a big moment at Brooklyn College, and there was a big moment at City College, and Hunter College was also kind of involved, and we were all campaigning for the reinstatement of free tuition. Which I like to think has something to do with the Excelsior Scholarship that was released recently, because there was—

O'Brien: Absolutely.

Danger: —there was a lot of action, and there was action in the SUNY schools as well. Yeah, and so I was spending time with those two groups of people, and someone said
recently, there’s—no one has better bookshelves than non-binary femmes who are not in academia, and that’s kind of how it was. Even though we were in the sort of beginnings of academia, we were undergrads. Everyone was so mind-blowingly smart and interesting, and this was also a year after Occupy [Wall Street] had started, and so everyone was, like, so mind-blowingly smart and interesting and radical that that started to—and queer—like, that was the word that people were using. They were queer. And so that’s kind of where I had taken my queer identity and then, from also being friends with all these transmasc people who were using gender-neutral pronouns. And then also because a trans woman that I knew in college was like, “You’re trans,” when I was in college, and very much not thinking about that, and just—yeah, I don’t know, sort of going back through all of that. One day we were just at a bar and I was like, “I think I would like to use they and them pronouns,” and that’s just what happened, and then I think that I definitely benefit from transmasculinity, where my presentation was shifting and people would just use they and them pronouns for me anyway. Yeah, I don’t know. I guess, you know, in college I really started identifying as gay—or actually, very strongly as a lesbian—and actually, maybe we can talk about this at some point, but I became very familiar with Autostraddle? So, I became involved in the very beginnings—the first couple of months of Autostraddle, so that also was a big part of shaping my identity, particularly as a lesbian. So, sort of as time moved on, I was very influenced around—by the groups of people who I was with, very much because they showed me the possibilities of what it was like to be different kinds of gay or lesbian, or—just, you know, the whole LGBT—showed me what it was like, or what it could be like to be that way. Yeah, and I think that my identity has definitely evolved with my politics and the people that I’m around. I think that the communities that were around me really enabled me to be and to continue to be who I am, no matter how that changes.

O'Brien: So, you were doing student organizing at Brooklyn College a year after Occupy. Your politics at the time, were they…? You mentioned they were evolving.

Danger: Right.

O'Brien: Do you have…?

Danger: Yeah. I’m trying to figure out where I was then. I mean, part of the reason that I went to Brooklyn College—no, a big reason that I went to Brooklyn College was—well, no. Okay. Part of the reason was because my friends went there, and that’s because in my last couple of months of living in DC, I had had friends from New York who I met in DC, because we decided to host a birthday party for one of them even though we didn’t know each other, and that person whose birthday it was is actually one of my best friends now. Anyway. So, I knew people in New York, and so I came up partially because I was friends with them, and then also because the people who I knew were at Brooklyn College and were doing organizing in the student union, and those were ideas that I had had when I was sort of dropping out of American University, and sort of had lost touch with for two years while I was waiting tables. And so it really seemed like the obvious transition. I think that my politics were very student power-oriented, which makes sense, because that’s where I was, and, in a way, where I still am, because I’m planning to go to CUNY Law School. Yeah, I don’t know. We were very centered around being from New York, being
a student at a public school—because previously I’d been a student at a private school, but before that was always in public school. You know, I think that because I was hanging out with a lot of queer femmes—are all femmes queer? I don’t know. This is something that’s been coming up. Yeah, and so a lot of the politics were centered around—or, were about decentralizing patriarchy in activist spaces. Yeah, and I think that was extremely important, because it wasn’t just like those were my politics at the time, it’s like, those are the politics that I build upon as I go, and so I think that was really when I began to recognize that patriarchy is threatening to groups of people of different genders who are trying to build together. And so I think that that was my biggest lesson from that, and also direct action gets the goods. Yeah, oh, and it was also really scary because we would have—yes, collective action gets the goods, thank you! That’s great. Where did you get that?

O’Brien: I had them made for my union.

Danger: Oh, awesome!

O’Brien: For a national caucus of graduate student workers that we had.

Danger: Oh, that’s amazing.

O’Brien: Yeah, I have a box of them down here.

Danger: Oh, wow! Cool, yeah. I was seeing all of the union stuff around here. Very cool. And then also lots of names of sociologists that I haven’t seen in, like, maybe six months, and I’m just like, wow! [Max] Weber!

O’Brien: I’m teaching Weber at the moment.

Danger: Nice. What were we saying? Oh, right, yeah, because we were doing a lot of direct actions, which sometimes resulted in students getting arrested on campus, because we were a public campus and, you know? And I think that also I was getting a sense of, like—I was getting a sense of class, because you would see things like a protest at Brooklyn College where we were literally doing a sit-in, and students were getting dragged by the NYPD through the hallways of our school, and then you would see something, like the protests at Cooper Union, where students would be occupying the president’s office for weeks, and the president would be scared, and no one would dare lay a hand on them. And so I think that I got—I really became politicized around just who could do what and get away with it.

O’Brien: So you were working in food service for a while and going to Brooklyn College, and then applied to Babeland?

Danger: Yeah.

O’Brien: And Pleasure Chest at the same time?

Danger: Yes.
O’Brien: And tell me about the choice of starting to work at Babeland.

Danger: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I think that this was the beginning of me really wanting to be around more queer people, especially since I was using they and them pronouns, as well as she and her pronouns, but the use of she and her pronouns felt sort of coercive. And so I just wanted to be somewhere where I could be more authentically myself, and I wanted to sell sex toys. That seemed fun. And I don’t remember if this was the case, but I think that I wanted to get out of food service, because the hours were really long. And particularly the hours that I was working at the coffee shop were long and difficult, and I just wanted to get up and, like, start my day at 11:00, or end it at, you know, 10:30 instead of starting it at 4:30, or ending at, you know, two or three or whatever. Yeah. So, I wanted to apply to Babeland because I wanted to be around more queer people, so that I could be who I wanted to be.

O’Brien: When was it that you started working there?

Danger: Wow, I just—I just had my three-year anniversary.

O’Brien: Congratulations.

Danger: Yeah. Thank you.

O’Brien: So that makes it April—

Both: 2014?

Danger: Yeah.

O’Brien: Okay.

Danger: Yeah, I was just thinking about that.

O’Brien: And what—can I ask what your starting pay was at Babeland?

Danger: Yeah. Starting—oh god, do I even…? I’m—the starting pay was $12, and then once you passed your 90-day review, it went up to $13.

O’Brien: And what—how were working conditions for hosts? What were some pluses and difficulties?

Danger: Yeah, I mean, it was definitely—so, the being around the queer people thing was exactly what I expected. It was amazing and occasionally dramatic, and everyone—you know, everyone had great style, and—I don’t know. And the discount was fun, and toys were fun, and just, like, having this body of knowledge and returning to the communities that I was in, and having that be fun and sexy, was great. Those aren’t really working conditions, though. Those were just things that—

O’Brien: They are advantages.
Danger: They are advantages. I mean, from the beginning it was a little bit difficult. I was employed for—I was offered—the way that the shifts were structured was that you either were full-time, which was almost no one, you worked at least three shifts a week, or you worked two shifts a week and were required to pick up four shifts a month, or you were assigned zero permanent shifts and had to pick up six shifts a month, and that was me. I was originally offered the two shifts, but I couldn't take them for whatever reason. I don't remember why. I think because I couldn't start immediately. And so I had the shifts that you pick up. And so I was, like, scraping together $400 a month at this point, and I was living in a commune, which was really helpful, because it was okay that I was making $400 a month, and I was still being supported.

O'Brien: Where was the commune?

Danger: The commune was in Bed-Stuy. It was called Casa Duende. It was a queer commune. There were, at any given time, between five to seven of us. We actually built a wall in the house to accommodate more people. I lived there for maybe a year, or a year and a half, but the commune in total went on for five or six years. Yeah. Which, I'm—like, would be more than happy to talk about at any point.

O'Brien: So, you had—you struggled to pick up shifts, and had a good dynamic with your coworkers.

Danger: Yes, exactly. What else? Oh, I just always had a weird relationship with the managers. I found that communication was difficult, that I felt like I was being treated in a standoffish way because I was new. A lot of things were unclear. I went through 30 hours of training, which, actually, I don't know if that's a lot, but we went through a lot of training, and after the training I felt like I still didn't know a lot of things, and I felt intimidated asking basic questions because—I didn't think I was going to be written up, but I didn't want to seem stupid, or like I wasn't paying attention. Because that's kind of how I'd be treated when I asked the questions. Not like I was stupid, but like I wasn't paying attention, and like the answers were somewhere and I wasn't finding them. And then—excuse me. And so I was working at all three of the stores. I actually met my partner at one of them. And I worked a couple of shifts at the store that I work at now with someone who just was racist and fucked up, and mean. And eventually that person got fired for being racist and fucked up and mean and, you know, maybe some other stuff, and so then I started working as a two shift, plus you have to pick up more shifts. Oh, no. I got three shifts, immediately, at that store, and that's when I started becoming more connected with other workers. But, yeah, that's what it was like in the very beginning. I would say for six months.

O'Brien: Do you remember the first conversations around organizing?

Danger: Yeah. So—I mean, maybe I should preface this with, you know, that's what my first couple of months were like, and then as I started working at the location on Mercer Street, I began to be more familiar with what the working conditions were like, and also was finding that even though I was working more hours, I still wasn't really making as much money as I would've liked, and also had moved out of—the commune had sort of disintegrated, mutually and on good terms, which is great—and so I was 100% having to
support myself. And I was like, “This isn’t—I’m not making enough money.” And then I would see other things happening, like when someone would get fired, you would just—the way that you found out was that you got an email that said, “So-and-so is no longer with Babeland,” or something like that. It was a one-line email. It was very ominous. And then of course everyone would immediately start gossiping afterwards, like, “What happened? What happened? What happened?” And we were all, at the very least, friendly with each other, so it was like, you would get the information—whoever was closest to that person would get the information from the source, be like, “Is it okay if I share this?” We would find out. And a lot of the times, you know, it was a lot of people getting fired over things like individually speaking up about workplace conditions that were universally disliked. And, for instance, one of my friends who had worked there for three years and who was a shift supervisor—we had to, every year, do feedback surveys, and they were specifically asking for feedback, and she was saying stuff along the lines of, “I feel like Babeland is kind of losing touch with its queer roots, and its queer customer base, whatever.” Fired. For being too critical.

O’Brien: How many incidents can you remember of people being fired for giving feedback, or complaining, or speaking up?

Danger: You know what? I don’t remember an exact number. Because it would happen—I mean, it would happen relatively frequently, because either that would happen, people would get in trouble for posting complaints about that job on their personal social media accounts, and it happened enough that there was this pervasive fear of it—a really big fear of speaking up. Because the other thing that would also happen was, maybe you’d be ignored. Yeah. You’d be ignored or you’d be fired, or you’d get in some sort of trouble. And then—I don’t know, I mean, there was just other stuff that led to the organizing. We didn’t always feel safe at the store, and we felt like upper management was really out of touch with that. You know, as queer and trans people we are targets of violence, and we happen to be concentrated in this retail store, and that makes some people mad, particularly—I mean, particularly men. Like, it makes men angry, and it maybe makes them angry that we sell dildos? I don’t know, whatever. And so particularly in the Lower East Side store, there—which actually still employs the most trans people, and in particular the most trans women—and so there would be incidents at that store in particular of verbally and physically violent transphobic harassment, transmisogynist harassment. There would be—I mean, it was just—it was so scary. Like, someone spit on another customer in the store and they had to close the store. Two guys joked about having a gun. People would shout slurs. And then also, something that happens all the time is that we get prank phone calls where people are—I mean, they’re rude, or violent, or masturbating, just the whole spectrum of people taking out their feelings about sex and sexuality on us, which is often violent. And we didn’t feel like we had enough support around that. We wanted phones that had caller ID. We wanted phones that we didn’t have to pick up, or something like that, or that would go to voicemail or something like that, or that would just go between the stores, because we do call each other a lot. Yeah. And also, it was like—you know, the policy was that if you really felt threatened, and people agreed on it—and usually if there wasn’t a manager around, because they would say no—you would close the store. But the problem was that you would lose wages.
O’Brien: Oh, wow.

Danger: Yeah. And so it was like, you had to choose between your physical and emotional safety, and your financial safety, which is violent. Yeah, and so I think safety was a big part of the conversation, and then wages were also part of the conversation. And so, to answer your question, we—those were the conversations that we were having around when we started organizing, was just things really reaching—I mean, the turnover just got really high, and we were just losing people that we really cared about, because it was people who had been there for a long time who were getting fired or quitting. I actually—it’s almost like a curse. I’ve been there for three years, and I don’t know almost anyone who’s been there longer, for three and a half years. So I don’t know what’s going to happen to me in, like, six months. So, people were getting fired and quitting. The turnover was really high. We were losing people who we loved, and—so it was actually my partner, who had just been there for three years at that point, who was kind of like, “I can’t be at this job any longer, but I also can’t leave without—knowing that it’s just going to be like this unless we do something.” And so she contacted an organizer at the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union, the RWDSU, and we met with him and another organizer, and—

O’Brien: How long had you been at the store, at Babeland?

Danger: Two years.

O’Brien: Two years at that point.

Danger: I’d been there two years. And so we met with the two of them, and we were kind of like, “I don’t know, do you even organize stores like this? Do you want a sex toy store in your union? You know, a lot of these people are queer and trans. Can you handle that?” And it—I will give them so much credit, because they were like, “Yes, everyone—retail stores have a place in our union. Big stores, small stores.” They were doing a campaign—I don’t know, maybe they still are—with Guitar Center, and also they organized small bookstores, stuff like that. And so they were like, “Yes, you definitely have a place here.” And then, once we started—you know, once it was time to start reaching out to other people to organize—they actually brought in someone to train not just the organizers, but the whole office, on gender and sexuality competence. And so it really felt like a big moment, because it’s like they were—

O’Brien: The whole local office?

Danger: Yeah.

O’Brien: Yeah, that’s great.

Danger: Yeah, yeah. And so it felt like we were really impacting each other, which was great. And then in the beginning, the conversations—I don’t know how much I’m really supposed to talk about the process, but the conversations were basically, like, “Hey, it’s precarious to work here, it’s threatening to our safety, we’re not making enough money, people are fired or ignored if they say anything. So it seems like the thing to do now is to
take collective action—like, become a unit. And, you know. Let’s get a union! Let’s get a union.” And people—I mean, there were a range of reactions to that. Some people were like, “Yes. Let’s do it,” you know, “Let’s do it immediately.” There happened to be a lot of anarchists in the Lower East Side store, so that store was very activated. And then other people would kind of be like, “Maybe. Let me get more information,” you know, we’d get more information. And then other people would say, “Yes, I’m definitely pro-union, but I cannot be out about it.” And then there were people who were like, “Please stop talking to me about this.” And so it was a range of people. It was definitely a range, and I will say that a lot of that has changed. People are just out, pro-union now—I mean, now that we have it, of course. But yeah, that’s definitely what it was like at first, and so it was just slowly getting other people interested and more involved, developing leadership. And then sort of meeting with the organizers a lot, who really—well, one of them was a queer woman, so we were immediately like, “We feel good about you.” But they really earned our trust. Yeah, and so that’s what the beginning of the conversations were like.

O’Brien: That’s great.

Danger: Yeah.

O’Brien: Are there other parts of the organizing process that leap out for you, or that you’d like to share?

Danger: Yeah, definitely! I mean, so, once we had notified the National Labor Relations Board—right, NLRB? —the National Labor Relations Board that we wanted to file for an election, they notified the company, and were kind of like—and then the union was kind of like, “Well, you could voluntarily recognize the union,” and they were like, “No,” so that’s what kind of led to us having an election. And I think one of the most amazing things for me is that as soon as that happened, we—I mean also, obviously after, you know, months and months and months of organizing together—we really became a cohesive direct action-oriented unit. And so, you know, fucked up things would happen. Like, we found out that Babeland wasn’t following the New York Paid Sick Leave Act. Their policies were illegal. And so we advocated on our behalf for that. We were like, “No. We are calling in sick. It’s your responsibility to find coverage, and no, we’re not going to come in if you can’t find coverage.” And things would happen. Someone was having a gender-affirming surgery and wasn’t getting paid out for that time. And so basically what would happen any time that someone was being treated unfairly, they would send an email, and all—each store had a text thread. And so the person would send an email, and they would text the thread and be like, “Hey, will you back me up on this?” And, you know, whoever was down with it would be like, “Yes.” And so the company or the managers would get a flood of emails being like, “Give her her sick time! Pay her out for this!” and they would be like, “Fuck. Well, okay.” [laughter] And we were really equipped with a lot of knowledge, you know? We knew our rights much more than we did before, and we helped each other really assert those rights and… I don’t know. I think that that was incredibly powerful. I think that to be able to take that action without having a contract is a really big deal, and we were able to do things like get severance pay for my friend who was fired. It wasn’t a lot. It wasn’t as much as it should’ve been, but we got severance pay for them by doing things like flyering outside of the stores. And so we really made ourselves present. We
always made sure what we were doing was—I mean, you know, we always made sure what we were doing was legal. And so it’s like, the company could be really upset about something, but all they could really do was voice that they were upset about it. And so we would continue giving interviews, tabling outside the store, and just sticking up for each other, and that was really, really meaningful.

O’Brien: What—what were the steps in building that level of solidarity between your coworkers?

Danger: So—I don’t know how much I want to or should share about the—because there definitely, like, were steps in the process itself which I could very much rattle off, but I’m not—I think that I’m going to be more vague about it. I mean…

O’Brien: There are a fair number of published manuals on the topic.

Danger: Right. Yeah, that’s what I’ve—

O’Brien: It’s not a secret, you know?

Danger: No, that’s true. And also, seeing people organizing in different unions, I also think that what our organizers in particular were doing was something really special.

O’Brien: Interesting.

Danger: But I don’t know. I mean, you’ve talked to my coworkers. Maybe you know more. It was a lot of individual conversations, meetings in people’s apartments, and conversations—it would be, like, conversations with union organizers and someone we were trying to organize, and someone who was already on the organizing committee, so there was a lot of that. But I think more importantly—I don’t know if it’s more important. All of the steps are very important. But something else that was really important was staying socially cohesive. And so we would spend time with each other and have real, you know—like, build on these real relationships, because now not only were we hanging out, but we were also doing something political together, which I think sort of tied us up in risk and made us want to protect each other more. And so having a lot of those personal connections, I think were important. And then—yeah, I don’t know. I think that just feeling empowered to stand up for each other was a really big deal, and being tied up with each other politically was a really big deal. And I would say that was probably, one of the things that made us most—that brought us closer. Because it brought us closer politically, in investing in our—like, each other’s protection, and it brought us together personally, because we had to take time to form those relationships.

O’Brien: How many staff, total, are in the unit?

Danger: Around 30.

O’Brien: Around 30. And how many would you say are queer, more or less?
Danger: I want to say that almost everyone is queer. There have been new people who I haven’t met yet, who I, like, do not know the sexualities of, but at the time that we were organizing, everyone was queer. And then—or, I don’t want to say that everyone was queer, because I don’t know if everyone who’s trans also identifies as queer.

O’Brien: Sure.

Danger: But I would say everyone was queer and/or trans.

O’Brien: Yeah. And how many people were already in subcultures, or scenes, or communities with each other besides that coworker solidarity?

Danger: Yeah, definitely. I mean, a lot of us got the jobs through each other. A lot of people—like, people were dating, people were in kink scenes together, people were organizing together, people had friends in common. How many people was—I would say probably half. Yeah.

O’Brien: Were those communities—did they play any sort of role in the campaign?

Danger: Oh, yeah, definitely. I think that a big part—I mean, something that was part of our process was reaching out to community groups and sort of getting their support, so that if we needed… Like, for instance, there was an unfair firing, so we called our community groups to call the owners, to put pressure on them to, you know, give severance, whatever.

O’Brien: So, were these community groups ones that you—the workers were a part of, or that you had built relationships with, or what?

Danger: Yeah, definitely. And so it was really interesting. It was a really—you know, it was a broad range of different groups. And so it was stuff like the Audre Lorde Project, you know, people who’re involved in communities of color. The Sylvia Rivera Law Project—so many acronyms—yeah, the SRLP. And then it would also be, like, kink communities, or kink organizations, or city organizations.

O’Brien: Do you remember which kink organizations were supportive in the campaign?

Danger: I don’t. I do not remember. I think that Stella [Dance], who you spoke with, did a lot of that work. But I don’t remember exactly who—I could find it, if need be.

O’Brien: I can track it down, probably.

Danger: Okay! Actually, no, not without my phone, never mind. But yeah, so, those definitely came—like, we would not have had those connections if people had not already been participating actively in respective, sort of organizing communities. Definitely. Like, definitely definitely.

O’Brien: And do you remember any encounters you all had with the broader labor movement, outside of the staff organizers of RWDSU?
Danger: Yeah. It was actually pretty cool. So, we did a little bit of—like, we did some solidarity work, because it’s, I think, hopefully part of organizing is also politicizing and getting people to view themselves as workers, and struggle is tied up in—liberation tied up in other people’s liberation, and all workers deserve a union. And so, at the time, Verizon was striking, and so we would go and picket with them. A very different demographic from who we are.

O’Brien: Yeah. We picketed with them as well.

Danger: Yeah. Yeah! And so, I don’t know, we were probably there together at some point. You know, that was really important, because it was, like, these people who were very demographically different from us, and I’m sure some of them were queer, and potentially some of them were trans, but—

O’Brien: So it was specifically mostly technical workers, right?

Danger: Yeah.

O’Brien: Men, mostly men, who worked, like, repair—

Danger: A lot of men, yeah.

O’Brien: —on the equipment systems, picketing at stores.

Danger: Right, exactly. And so—I don’t know. It was an incredibly—it was just, like, an affirming environment. There wasn’t any queerphobia or transphobia. It was just people very much seeing themselves as workers. We also—the RWDSU also covers the Herald Square Macy’s, which is the first place that they ever organized, and at the time, also, they were bargaining, or they were renewing a contract. And they—I don’t know what the specifics were, but they were often flyering outside the store, you know, meeting at the RWDSU offices. And so we would encounter them a fair amount, both in the office and on the street. And so we were in solidarity with them, too, and people would show up to our stuff. And so we actually, you know—and also because the RWDSU had that gender and sexuality competence training at the very beginning, I would say that, for me, I had an overwhelmingly positive experience with labor. And I think that overall, for most people, the experience was really positive. Yeah. And, you know, a lot of stuff actually came out of that, where it’s like, my partner left Babeland and now works at CWA. I don’t remember what CWA stands for. Communication Workers Alliance?

O’Brien: Of America.

Danger: Of America. Communication Workers of America.

O’Brien: Is she with the local, or the region?

Danger: She’s with the local. I don’t remember the number, but it’s like, some—she reps the nonprofits.
O'Brien: Oh. Yeah.

Danger: Yeah. So, I don’t know, it’s like, people got more involved in labor stuff, I’m—

O'Brien: 1180.

Danger: 1180. Yes. It is 1180, thank you.

O'Brien: And they’re one of my favorite locals in the city.

Danger: Oh, really?

O'Brien: I have tremendous admiration for them.

Danger: Oh my god. I will tell her that. She’ll be really glad to hear it.

O'Brien: Is she an organizer?

Danger: She’s a rep.

O'Brien: That’s awesome. I’ve sent a couple of nonprofit staff people to 1180 to—

Danger: Cool! Yeah.

O'Brien: —as a good union to work with.

Danger: Yeah, for sure. I—yeah, I don’t know. The work that I’ve seen has been really awesome, and I am just—it’s an exciting idea to have nonprofits in unions. So it’s like, yeah. So she’s in a union. I’m thinking about potentially going into labor law. You know, people are much more politicized as workers, and now we have an infrastructure to back us up, but our main infrastructure is us as a community, and the union is there if we need additional support, and they’re very proactive, but they also give us a lot of space to organize.

O'Brien: So, tell me about the contract you all want.

Danger: Yeah. Totally. So, I think the first thing that a lot of people ask about the contract is, “Did you get a wage increase?” Yes. We did get a wage increase. I think it was something like, we got a wage increase upon signing, and then we’re getting one [knocks on wood] I think in May, graduated depending on how long we were there. And so, you know, that was great, and also—

O'Brien: Do you—how much was it for you?

Danger: For me? Oh my god—I’m so embarrassed. I actually don’t know, and if I had my phone I would pull up the contract.

O'Brien: Yeah. You can look it up, I imagine.
Danger: Yeah, that’s—yeah. I mean, the contract is definitely—like, I have it in my email. I am making over $15 now. I’m embarrassed that I don’t know more specifically. And so we got a wage increase. It’s not huge, because—I mean, it was interesting. We were able to look, more or less, into the company’s funds, and we were like, “Oh shit, they really,” you know, “they can’t. They don’t have—"

O’Brien: They showed their books to you?

Danger: Yeah, they were required to show their books to us. We did an information request, and so they showed us their books. And it was like, “Okay, you definitely can afford a raise, but you probably can’t afford the $18 an hour that we’re asking for. And that we’re not going to stop asking for.” So, yeah. We got that, and then we actually got a lot of stuff that I had talked about before with the conversations that we were having about organizing. So, with regards to safety, now, if you close the store early because your safety is being threatened, you get your full night’s wages paid out, which is really cool. And then—let’s see, what else? The Lower East Side store now has caller ID and a voicemail, so they don’t have to answer it if they don’t want to, which is really cool, because—I mean, I really can’t overstate how much phone harassment we get. It’s basically, like, if you work a shift at Babeland, you will answer a prank call at least once during that shift. That’s how often it is. And a lot of the—oh my god—prank calls can be so racist, and they’re also getting increasingly specific. I got this one with so—sorry, I know this isn’t the question, but I thought that we got this one that was so interesting, where someone picked up the phone, and the person who called was like, “Your gender isn’t real,” and I was like, “What?” I just—you know, obviously that’s a horrible thing to say, but it’s so specific to a prank call to Babeland, where a lot of cis people do work. But I just thought that that was, like—you know, you have to know a certain amount of things about gender to prank call a store like Babeland and then do that to someone. Anyway, so that happened. It happens less now. One of my favorite things is that we got affirmative action hiring, so it’s not just—I mean, we did get non-discrimination, but we also got affirmative action. So basically, if we find that they’re not hiring enough people of color, trans people—people with different abilities, is a really big deal—and so if we find that they’re not hiring a diversity of people, we can actually file that as a grievance. If we find that new rules that they make are unreasonable, we can file a grievance. If—you know, if we find that, say, vendors aren’t being trained—or a vendor who’s presenting to us is using extremely gendered language, we can file an information request to see if that person was informed about us, you know? And not just who we are as an audience, but as people who are—basically, not just to cater to our individual identities—which is valid, and should be true—but also to facilitate us talking about—like, when we’re on the sales floor, talking to the customers in a way that is not presumptive of their gender or the sex they’re having, or the genders of their partners, or, you know, anything. So we can file an information request to see if they’ve gotten adequate training. We also—this isn’t in the contract, it’s an addendum—but I think that we got a really rad dress code, which is—I mean, I would never picture myself saying the words “rad dress code,” because dress codes are often rooted in fucked up shit. But we felt like the dress code was being unfairly enforced, particularly with trans women, and so the workers drafted a new dress code that was like—I mean, we were basically like, “Alright, whatever. We won’t show our genitals. Fine. Other than that, we’re going to wear whatever we want. You know, we will
be respectful of people’s sensitivity to different scents. That’s fine. We want to do that. Like, there’s almost nothing that you can’t wear, except for something that advocates violence against an oppressed group, and this must be enforced, if you’re going to enforce it, across the board. And we are the ones who determine if that’s fucked up or not.” So, yeah. I think those are some of my contract highlights.

O’Brien: So, it sounds like overall that the culture there has been really profoundly transformed by the solidarity between people.

Danger: Yeah, absolutely. Oh, and also—yes, and also we went from—we guess this is pretty standard with unions—we went from being at-will employees, where we could be fired for any reason, up to no reason at all, to being just cause employees, where they have to have a reason that fits certain criteria to fire us, if they’re going to fire us. Yeah. So, yes, the culture has definitely changed for the better. Yeah, I don’t know. I just never thought that I was going to be a part of something like this. I think maybe a lot of people didn’t, also, and so this has just been, I don’t know, transformative.

O’Brien: How has it transformed you?

Danger: I mean, I’m really interested in labor now, and I was sort of peripherally interested in labor before, because a lot of people I know were involved in it, but I think that a lot of my—you know, a lot of my interests before were around immigration, and queer people of color, and trans people. And obviously I’m still interested in those things, and I have a much stronger labor lens on that, and the underemployment of those communities, and like—I don’t know, just the way that employment and jobs are violent and oppressive, particularly towards those communities. I feel a sense of solidarity with my peers. I feel invested in anyone and everyone having a union. I feel more powerful at work. I mean, I feel like the people in power are a little bit antagonistic around it, but now I feel like there is a process to deal with that, and it’s a process that we have control over. It’s not like the union just tells us we’re going to file this grievance. It’s also like, you know, they’re like, “Well, do you want to think about a collective action that we can take?” and they let us take the lead on that. And I think that I’ve grown as an organizer. I think that I’m less reserved about, you know, approaching—I don’t know. I’m less reserved about having organizing conversations. I think I feel more confident as, like—I feel more confident calling myself an organizer. Yeah. And then, also, I have closer personal relationships with my coworkers.

O’Brien: That’s wonderful.

Danger: Yeah.

O’Brien: And what is your life outside of work like these days?

Danger: Let’s see. I’m studying to get into law school. Yeah. I’m taking—I’m studying for the LSATs. I have—I have another job. I work at a music venue in Williamsburg. I don’t know. I—oh my god, what do I do outside of work? I’m just, like…

O’Brien: Do you live alone?
Danger: I do not live alone. I just moved in with my partner.

O’Brien: In what neighborhood?

Danger: Prospect-Lefferts [Gardens]. Yeah. And there is—I will say, there is a lot of union talk in the home, because she’s an organizer and because we organize together, and, you know, people are like, “Wait. You work together, you’re in a relationship, and you’re organizing together?” Because even before I moved in there, I was basically living there, and everyone was like, “That’s a terrible idea,” and we were like—we’re both very stubborn, so we were like, “No! We’re going to do it!” And so we did, and it’s still good. Yeah, so I just moved to Prospect-Lefferts. Yeah, I don’t know. What do I…? That’s so weird. What do I do?

O’Brien: That’s a good place.

Danger: Yeah, I don’t know. Not a whole lot of stuff I can say on recording [laughter]. Yeah, and I mean—you know, actually another big part of my life is that—is, I quit drinking a year ago, and so I’m in a recovery program that’s for that, and I’m working a lot on mental health stuff, and which—

O’Brien: Congratulations.

Danger: Thank you. It takes a remarkable amount of time. Like, god, someone pay me for this! You know? It’s so much work, and it’s so much emotional labor, and it’s a lot of sweat labor in a different way. Oh, and then this is sort of tangentially related to work, but it is outside of work. I’m also the shop steward for our location on Mercer Street, and so I am a lot of interfacing between the workers and the company, and the workers and the union, and the union and the company. And literally, in my free time, that’s something that I do.

O’Brien: How many stewards are there, total? One per each store?

Danger: One for each store. So there’s three.

O’Brien: And are those—are there any other unit positions besides stewards?

Danger: Yeah. There is a labor management committee that meets every couple of months, and so there is one representative from each store that literally sits across the table from the others.

O’Brien: So six positions total?

Danger: Yeah.

O’Brien: And do staff—RWDSU staff—join the labor management committees?

Danger: Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Our—I believe it’s our representative and then his director.
**O'Brien:** Anything else that you’d like to include in this interview?

**Danger:** I don’t know. I mean, I am—I’m just really excited to be doing this. I grew up partially in New York, so I love the New York Public Library, and so I’m thrilled to be part of the database. I mean, whatever. This is what I say at the end of every interview that I do about the union, but, you know, anyone can start a union. I definitely—yeah, I definitely want to say that. I think that if other queer and trans people are hearing this, I want to affirm that survival is at times incredibly difficult, but not impossible, and—I don’t know. Like, I just am really—I am really excited and feel really lucky to be part of a trans story, because I think that a lot of that is what keeps me going.

**O'Brien:** That’s great. Thank you so much for your time, and contributing your story and your presence for this.

**Danger:** Yeah, thank you.