I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Tupili Lea Arellano

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Tupili Lea Arellano conducted by Caro De Robertis on September 28 & 29, 2022. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: An Oral History of Our Elders Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

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Narrator: Tupili Lea [E.] Arellano | Location: Tucson, AZ

Interviewer: Caro De Robertis | Date: September 28, 2022

Q: Okay, so I'm here with Tupili Lea [E.] Arellano. Thank you so much for opening your home and time to this work together; it is such a gift and honor. Can you please tell me your name and who you are?

Arellano: My name is Tupili Lea Espinosa Arellano, and I am a seventy-year-old indigenous elder. My tribal families are Mayo and Meshika [*phonetic*] and Rarámuri, and one of my *tía* [aunt] says we have Apache, and right now, that's what I'm saying that,—the tribal family that I carry in my DNA [deoxyribonucleic acid], and what else? I'm an elder, and I've been a social justice activist from a very early age. And the first time I went to the streets was 1968 to fight against the Vietnam War that we were waging, and I was very active since then. And that was in Silver City, New Mexico, a very small, conservative town, but there were people that just said, "You're coming with us," so. And I was already calling out in my family the things that were not okay, which is a form of activism.

Q: Thank you, and when and where were you born?

Arellano: The ancestors are saying something to me, okay. So they're saying, we'd like a little song first before—

Q: Wonderful.

Arellano:—we go forward, okay? So I'm just going to sing a little piece of this song, and it was written by Violeta [del Carmen] Parra [Sandoval], and it's called *Gracias A la Vida.* [*sings*] *Gracias a la vida, que me ha dado tanto. Me ha dado la marcha de mis pies cansados. Con ellos anduve ciudades y charcos. Playas y desiertos, montañas y llanos. Y la casa tuya, tu calle y tu patio*. Gracias Violeta, thank you for that. So where was I born?

Q: *Gracias* [thank you], Violeta Parra, *gracias, Tupili, muchas gracias por traer esa canción y ese arte.*

Arellano: Yes, yes, it's a gratitude song.

Q: Yes, yes. Yes, when and where were you born?

Arellano: I was born in 1952 in Silver City, New Mexico. And my mother was in labor, and there was another woman in the room with her in labor, and they were laboring and laboring, and the other woman was really screaming and everything, and my mom said it stopped her labor. And my mom went home and then came back the next day and had me, but all of that—and I ended up being very good friends and sweethearts with the daughter that was being birthed by her mother in that room when my mama went home. So we used to joke and say, "Ah, I'm older than you because, yes—" I go, "Yes, because your mama scared my mama," but anyways, that's

an important part of it, that the conditions weren't okay for my mother, so she just said, "I'll be back," and—yes.

Q: Wow. Could you tell me a little about what your childhood was like?

Arellano: Well, I came into the world in Silver City, New Mexico, and we lived there two years and then they—we moved here. And I—

Q: Here to Tucson?

Arellano: Tucson—

Q: —Arizona?

Arellano:—Arizona. Yes, I'm currently in Tucson, Arizona, after forty-two years of being in the [San Francisco] Bay Area [Northern California], so I've only been here, at this time, six months. And my childhood, you know, I am astounded and blown away at how my parents were able to care for us and ensure our survival and prevent us from having tragedies that a lot of people of our demography have without them creating them, but my parents found a way. I have arrived now at a place where I have real unconditional love for my parents and a deep, deep understanding of what it was like for them instead of just what happened to me. So I like to start that off now because that is—I am so grateful to myself for doing what I've needed to do to get there and so much closer with my mother and father's ancestors, so—

Silver City was a small town, and we had a lot of relatives there, that's good news and bad news and, yes, drama. And so I want to say that I don't have a ton of memories from that stage, but I remember when we moved here and that my parents said to me, "The doctors say that your tonsils are—aren't responding, we can't live here because you're having too much tonsillitis and you're having allergies and all this. And the doctors say to move to a dry, hot climate." So my parents—this is the kind of parents they were—they picked up their lives to bring me here, so I could survive well.

Q: Wow.

Arellano: There was a lot of hardships at times financially, and we came here, and my father found a job at Banner Mining Company. Now Banner owns all the hospitals, part of the University of—but my father was a foreman at that mine, the copper mine. And my parents were able to buy a little house, I guess it's like a tract home because there was a lot, they looked like, on the east side of Tucson on Craycroft [Road] near Twenty-Second [Street] in Tucson. Things began to feel so much better.

My father had this very well-paying job, and it was a really hard job, but that's what paid working-class, indigenous, Mexican men more money than other jobs if you didn't—if you weren't a career person with degrees and stuff. And my dad, he was so generous in his sacrifices to us because he used to come home from the mines, and even though he was a foreman and stuff, he used to go down, it was underground, and sometimes, he'd come home and my mom

would check him. Because he would have to not pay full attention when he was working in the mine, so he could do it and live it and survive it. And she used to check him, and he used to have sometimes—like I remember one time, he had to go to the emergency room to get stitches, and other times, my mom would patch him up and make sure his body was okay. That's how treacherous it was.

Q: Wow.

Arellano: And he was the foreman, can you remember the other *hombres* [men]? So my father was a miner off and on, not just that, they depleted that copper over there, and then my father didn't have that anymore, but we were already living in this house. And when I was born, I already had two brothers, and my mama was already overwhelmed and tired and my dad too. So I see that overwhelm in the photos, and yet, I see my photos where I was like this big light of happiness as a little one, two years old, three years old, this just big light of happiness in some of the photos and just the happiness, so—

So my father was struggling with alcoholism even from a young age. I interviewed my mother about it, and she said probably since his early twenties. And I've been sober forty-one years, and I want to say that my father was my catalyst for that. And I also understand from my own journey and also working as a substance abuse counselor that for many of us, that alcohol kept us alive to get through things that we couldn't get through otherwise. That was my story, and a lot of the women that I worked with, I would ask them, "Why do you drink or use drugs?" and they would say, "So I won't suicide." Hello, hello, people. That's called harm reduction, that's called

harm reduction, you—it keeps us alive. So I had that experience of alcohol was a crazy thing to ingest, but also, it helped me live through what I needed to live through.

And I had the plan, when I was still here in Tucson, I had the plan, by the time I was twenty-six years old, that I was going to get sober, and I got successfully sober. I started by—when I was twenty-eight, and by my twenty-ninth year, I had already had no alcohol in my system for a whole year. And alcohol was a big part of what took my father, and alcohol is one of the main genocidal tools that the white Europeans brought over here.

There was hardship in my family. There was the alcoholism, which is very hard to navigate for a family. It's a societal disease, and it's definitely a family disease. I'm just amazed at how our needs were taken care of even though I felt very abandoned. Like I said, my mother's exhausted, the third kid, husband that's alcoholic, et cetera, and so I basically raised myself with a lot of help from my mom and from my dad, but I raised myself. I begged for a sister because all the male energy in the family was so overwhelming, my father and my brothers, and my mom said, "I'm going to give you a sister," and she did.

My sister is four years younger than me, and she's—I helped raise her, I mean I really helped raise her. And that's one of the reasons I so wanted to come here it's because she's here, and we are closer than ever. And she's also medicine carrier and has a medicine—a traditional medicine practice. Hers is much more traditional than mine. And we connect every morning, we connect during the day, we—I mean it's—I cherish and love her like I always have. That is one of the greatest gifts that they both gave me because my father was very much engaged in keeping us all

alive and making all his sacrifices, so. Her name is Susana [*phonetic*] Espinosa Arellano. Espinosa is my mother's maiden name. It's traditional in Mexican culture that you pronounce your mother's presence by taking on her name as a middle name, so that's that.

I also want to say is I'm HSP [highly sensitive person], which is high sensory perception. People call it some high—high sensitive person as if something is off or wrong. No, it's unique, only fifteen percent of the human population is HSP, and it's really a gift of profound intuition, profound. Like I have had to spend my life, especially when I was doing my spiritual practices really regularly and everything, I have to partner with the ancestors to turn the volume down of what I was seeing and feeling. I remember when I started school—I was eight because my birthday is in January, so I started at eight—I broke out in hives for the first time, and we're talking little hives that turned huge in the emergency room, emergency room, emergency room. And the doctor said, "There's nothing wrong with this person physically," and they just gave me a lot of Benadryl and sent me home, which I would sleep it off.

And I want to say that those hives were an implosion of the high sensitivity because of everything that was going on in society, everything that was going on in my family, and it was more—let me go back. It was an explosion because if I'm not, I would have imploded and gotten real ill. And I have episodic experiences of the hives, I usually would get them twice a year, and this is the time that I would get them, and I haven't had them for forty years, but I had them since I was eight until forty. And I had to leave home and everything to recover from them and—but it was just sensory overload, sensory—between what it was happening in the world and how my family was treated. Let me just say it, between racism and white supremacy, misogynistic

patriarchy—I didn't have this language then of course—and being HSP. And HSPs are medicine carriers, and only fifteen out of every hundred individuals, and it's genetic, you can see it under a microscope. Hello, *gente* [people], you don't believe us? It's under a microscope now; you can see this genetic trait [*claps hands*], so.

Q: Wow. You mentioned that you can see in photographs of yourself as a very young child, this bright happiness, this big, bright, happiness. I wonder, do you have any memories of that big, bright happiness from the inside, from your childhood?

Arellano: I know the root of that happiness was I was born with it as many of us are. I was born with it, and my actual physical appearance and stuff changed as I was here longer and things got hard—harder. But I think it's the light, the luminous, beautiful light that we're all born with, we're all born with, unless there was trauma in the pregnancy or a lot of trauma circulating the mother while she was carrying the child. I think we come in with it. And it's still, there, I still have it, I'm just very much aware when it's shut down, and it's very rooted in the heart when it's shut down. And my longing for—oh, I just want to feel that open heartedness and happiness, and it's been harder since COVID [coronavirus disease 2019] for sure. It's been harder also because I can feel the collective, and that's when I'm turning down the volume and everything because there are days when I'm feeling things that aren't mine.

Q: Can you tell me about some of the seeds in your childhood of the person that you are today?

Arellano: [*Sighs*] Really, really living amongst and with the seeds that my mother and father would plant in the community, they really liked socializing, and I grew up in a dancing family. Everyone in my family, all my five siblings, with the exception of one, were intense dancers. We dance, and we love to dance, and we dance and we dance and we dance, and that was one of the medicines that saved us. But that seed of being a dancing family, of being community-oriented, of sharing, the way brown indigenous people share, it was like, yes, the community was sharing and staying alive by sharing.

And then my parents were resourceful; they could figure out anything. They planted the seeds in me that creativity was necessary and—as often as we can. And mother and I would sing together, we had a Mexican songbook with all the words written, and we'd sing together. She'd be in the kitchen cooking, and I'd be in the kitchen leading the songs with her and like that and the dancing. And my father also super creative, he was a carpenter, he did wrought iron. Later on, I turned him on to lapidary, and he cut stones, and I mean my father was amazingly creative, he loved to sing, he loved to dance.

And my mother, she had us crocheting. She had us with a little bead loom out of a cigar box first, and that was really intense because that's like calculus, and we're little at the table and listened. So she says, "Okay, let me—"So when we were that young, what she did was give us pot—give us these little looms to make pot holders, and those were not frustrating. And then because I'm an entrepreneur and we all are—we're from the *mercado* [market], us, this is how we survived, I used to go around selling them. I had businesses since I was—and so I was, of course, wanting to make pot holders for gifts but also to sell them.

You know that with all of the complications of alcoholism and codependency and everything, my parents instilled the seed in me that almost everything was possible regardless of the racism that we were facing and—you know. I really do hold the white Europeans responsible for alcoholism, and I want to say this, is that alcohol should have never been legalized by the FDA [United States Food and Drug Administration]. It causes the most harm and the most disease of any known drug in this country, and you can—that is researched. You can research it whoever wants to research it, that, and then right behind it is cigarettes, and those are fully promoted and fully accessible. If you want to have a war on drugs, you have a war on alcohol because that is responsible for so much tragedy and hurt. My journey with codependency is lifelong because I grew up in a society that's alcoholic, but I was in a family that's alcoholic, and I struggle. That's what the emotional sobriety is about, not giving myself away to people because their attention feels like something I'm craving or something I think I need.

Q: Yes.

Arellano: And we just did all kinds of things. I helped my parents start a business and—when I was still living here. We had a business together where we fashioned little *collares*, chokers made out of silver, turquoise, coral, and everything. And we went to the flea market together—Tanque Verde flea market—and we sold those, plus we—my father traded. Him and my mom I think made like two hundred of these little necklaces, and he traded for a car once, so he got his car that way, I mean just that resourcefulness. You want something? We'll find a way to get it. And I see that, I see that in *gente Mexicano* [Mexican people] all the time that are supposed to be

impacted by poverty, but they're making sure that they have what they need and their children have what they need and they celebrate, the dressing up of the whole family and just that kind of celebration.

My father loved to dress up, and he was a miner, and he didn't dress up when he was at home, but once a week, man, his white shirt, his—and I got that. I used to wear so many white shirts, and I got that from my father. And when I asked him about it, he says, "It's the way we show our honor and respect wherever we're showing up."

And the chili eating, the Hatch, New Mexico, chili eating, and my mother and father have cooking contests. They both were such good cooks, and they'd say, "Okay, come on in here, kids," and they'd ask us to test the tortillas and who made the best tortillas, things like that. And, of course, it was like, "No, no, don't ask us to do that" because our parents are looking at us like vote for me, vote for me, things like that. And cooking, the whole family; making tamales, the whole family; roasting chili before they would roast it for you. We roast our own chiles from—every year from Hatch, New Mexico, and bag them and put them in the freezer, making green corn tamales together, making red—making food together and eating it.

My parents were very social. I got to invite a lot of my friends over, and you know what, all of them were queer. So when I came out, my father's going, "No, Edna's [*phonetic*] queer—" and he didn't say queer, he said gay "—Edna's gay?" Edna was this <u>beautiful</u> Mexicana that was just charismatic and charming, "Not Edna!" I go, "Yes, Dad, Edna too." And then he'd say, "Michelle [*phonetic*]? Not Michelle!" because Michelle would come over and drink with him,

and if he couldn't cook anymore because he had to go to bed, she'd finish—she'd help us. Michelle was also an alcoholic [*laughs*] and a very good friend of mine, a white woman, master teacher in elementary school, I really respect for her teaching. Anyways, she was a dear friend of mine, and "Not Michelle."

I mean all these people were—I wasn't cis [cisgender] at times, they really saw it in me, but—some of my friends. And then a gay man, my father says, "Oh no, he helped me change the brake shoes." I said, "Oh, yes, he's a big old *joto* [male homosexual]." My father says, "You can say that word *joto*?" I said, "Yes, you can say it." I said, "Don't say it around gay people because you're not gay, but you can say it with me."

Q: And how old were you when this happened, when you came out to your father and had those conversations?

Arellano:, Well, I had wanted to come out to them when I was eighteen because I was emancipated legally. Was I still living with them? Yes, and I left very soon after I turned eighteen. But what happened was I called my mother when I was eighteen, and I says, "Mama, I want to come over and talk to you about my life." And she said, "You know what, *mija* [dear], I want to know everything about your life, but I want you to know that right now I'm going through some very hard things, and I don't have the ability to be with you the way I want to be with you when you tell me about your life. So can I call you when I'm ready to hear it?" I said, "Absolutely."

So she called me two years later, and she says, "*Mija*, I'm really grounded and centered." She didn't use that language I did, but she says, "I'm ready to hear," and so I went over there and I told her, and she says, "*Mija*, I've always known, I've always known." She said, "You know what people say? I love you no matter what beyond—?" Because that's the best language they have for it, but she says, "I've—I love you, and nothing is going to change that," so that—and then—

Q: What was that like for you? Do you remember how it felt or what it was like in your body when that—

Arellano: Oh, yes—

Q: —happened?

Arellano: It felt like a celebration in my body and a relief, and it was, like, oh, my God, of course. So in some very important ways, me and my mom were very close after I was already a teenager and older. We used to listen to music, sing music together, and I mean I felt a freedom and a party, like it's fiesta time, let's dance.

And then my father that—not that day, but another day when I went over there and he was there, and he knew I wanted to talk to him, and I told him, and I used the word lesbian because that's what we used then. And he said, "I don't ever want you to use that word again in this house," and I said, "Lesbian, lesbian, lesbian, lesbian." [*Laughs*] I kept saying it over and over, and he

knew it wasn't going to fly, like he was trying to get mad. I said, "Look at me, here I am telling you a very important part of my life, and you're focused on that word." I said, "You know the people that come over here with me that you love? They're all gay." "No, *no me digas* [no way], no!" and then he started going down the list, every one of them. And he already was attached to them, and they were so kind to him, and they'd come over and help us cook all the time because my dad would peter out earlier than my mother and all that and everything. And that really helped and that really helped.

And my dad became one of my best allies, one of my best allies. He let me come over and bring my girlfriends and sleep with them in his house, and my brothers would ask that. And my brother once said in front of me, "How come Lea gets to bring her girlfriends and everything?" and my father said, "*Pendejo* [stupid], she can't get married, you can. So when you get married, you bring your wife over here."

Q: Wow.

Arellano: Okay? And also one of my girlfriends was a master barber, and she wanted to start her own barbershop, and my father was a barber too. He went over and built out all her barbershop for her. They put in the chairs together, everything together, my father and Teresa [*phonetic*]. And also, my father came when I was living with Teresa, he came over, and he built me a whole silversmithing workshop with lapidary and everything because I was there. I was going to community college, and I was earning money by doing metalsmithing and cutting stones. My

dad gave me all that, and later on, he got so turned on he—by what he had set up for me, he went and sent it up in his own *cuartito* [little room].

Q: Wow.

Arellano: And he was cutting stones and we were—I was selling stones to the metalsmiths, the indigenous metalsmiths that I've got and some of my father's and—

Q: I'm wondering if we could talk about how you came out to yourself and maybe starting with even earlier than that—

Arellano: [*Claps hands*]

Q: [*Laughs*] even starting earlier than that with—when you first started to experience your gender, your queerness, your transness, and your childhood.

Arellano: I knew, I knew very early. I didn't have the verbal cognition, but I knew I was different, and I need a little bio break.

Q: Perfect.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So we were talking about how you first experienced your gender your queerness—

Arellano: Oh, I love this question.

Q: —in your childhood?

Arellano: Gracias, thank you. Well, I had two brothers that were older than me and then I came third, right? So I was around that, and there's my father and two brothers, so there's three males and then me and my mama. And so anyways, I just vacillated towards the little shorts and the boots with no shirt. That's what my brothers wore, and when I had my clothes on and then I tried theirs, I go, oh no, this is freedom, I want this. And my mother let me do that until was three and then she says, "*Mija*, you have to wear a shirt," and I said, "Why?" and she says, "Because that's what little girls do," okay, and that was it, and I didn't argue. But I always knew because I—

Q: Do you remember how you felt about it?

Arellano: Oh, I was upset, I was upset, and I would sometimes sneak my brother's clothes and put them on, hello? I had a neighbor, Cathy Lockenvitz [*phonetic*], a German girl, and she was my best friend. I grew up in a white, working-class neighborhood, and she's my best friend, and she had two brothers too, and we used to plan to dress in their clothes, and she used to get their—some of their clothes, and I used to get some of my brothers. So this was happening very early, this was happening like, I think the first time third grade, okay. But before third grade, well, when I was eight, I came out, I really came out.

So my grandmother in New Mexico—Silver City, New Mexico, my *abuela* Refugia Cuca, she was a foster mom, she had foster kids and so we used to go visit. So one of the times I went to visit, there was this new girl, her name was Yolanda [*phonetic*], and I was eight and she was ten. Oh, we liked each other like this, we were like—oh. We used to go sometimes twice a month, it's a four-hour drive from here to Silver City to—because both of my grandparents were there, my dad—my paternal and my maternal. And so anyways, the second time I went to visit, Yolanda and I were already like swooning for each other. She was feminine but very strong, and I shouldn't say but—she was feminine and strong.

And she asked me did I want to play house when we went to bed. Okay. And so she slept in a roll-away bed with another—a younger girl, and so they invited me. She invited me into the bed, and she says, "Okay, I'm going to be the mother, you're going to be the dad, and you're going to be the baby," and she just was the choreographer for all of it and everything. And she told the baby, "Don't cry, you're going to be quiet, you're just going to—babies are supposed to be quiet and sleeping." It's like, okay. So anyways, so there was kissing and holding, and you know what, I don't ever remember up until then, feeling like I belonged in the world. I have a sense from very early on that I don't belong here, I still have that sense, and I'll talk a little more about that. But that I belonged here and it was going to be fine, all about my gender and my queerness and my—you know? And what a gift Yolanda gave me, it was such a good experience, I was so—

There were things around abandonment in my childhood where I did not get enough physical contact, I did not get that kind of adoration. I think my mother had it for me when I was early—

very early when I was really little, I can't remember very well, but later on, it was just so much work and overwhelm in my family and in the world.

So this is what happened. So we had that encounter and everything, and I was just like, oh my God, finally. Next time we went to my grandmother's, the foster kids were gone, all of the foster kids were gone, okay. My step-grandfather who lived there had been molesting the kids, and there had been an investigating and they found out, so they had to take all the kids, and Yolanda went too, and we didn't know where she was. I said, "Where did Yolanda go?" and said, "We don't know, they don't give us that information." And they took my grandmother's license away because this *cabron* [dumbass] was—he molested everybody. I'm pretty sure he molested me. I don't have access to that, but I have access to going in his pickup truck just him and I, and him giving me an apple and money, and something was off about that, and I never wanted to go with him again, and then other stories, my mom, everybody, I mean he—I don't have to go down the inventory, but, yes, that happened.

I was grieved and I was heartbroken, but later on as I grew older and everything, I understood it later as an adult. That that was what we came together to do, and it was done and given in such a beautiful way. A part of me started to believe that it was okay to be that way where before it wasn't because I already knew that I was different from a very early age, and that I didn't want to be a boy. I never said I wanted to be a boy, but I didn't want to be a girl, I didn't want to be either or, you know what I'm saying? And—

Q: You already knew as a child that you didn't want to either or fully be a girl or fully be a boy?

Arellano: I knew that they did not fit me to just be a boy or just be a girl. I knew that very early on because I was aware that my body was a girl's body and—but—and I would protest. I would protest about the clothing and stuff, not always because I learned to be codependent very early, which codependency is a medicine and a strategy if you're aware of it and you don't use it in a phenomenally addictive way, which a lot of us do. But I knew that codependency saved my life too. I could anticipate people's things because of my intuition but also of studying people, so I knew what to give them before they asked for it, so the tension would be taken off of me immediately.

And like I was telling my sister yesterday, I said, "Do you remember those Easter dresses, those shiny, satin Easter dresses?" and she goes, "Oh, yes,—" "Oh, yes, I used to stare at them in the closet," [*laughs*] and I said, "I hated them." She says, "I know you did" and then I said, "Do you remember those flying saucer hats?" She goes, "Yes, those were weird." I said, "You know I just—I wanted the basket of goodies," and she said, "Yes," so.

Q: And after that, after that incredibly profound experience with Yolanda, which I'm so grateful that you shared here because people listening even fifty years from now and two hundred years from now will get so much meaning from knowing the story, knowing that it happened, and what it meant for you. It's going to mean so much to so many people.

Arellano: That's my hope. Anything I do, I'm always wanting to bring value to my communities, and I also am wanting to have value brought to me, it's—yes.

Q: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. That value is so present with this story as with all of the stories, we truly thank you. After that, what was the next experience that you had that resonated with or affirmed your gender or your queerness?

Arellano: Well, even before I—oh yes, after that, let me get this—

Q: Or before that.

Arellano: This feels better to me. So after that, I went back and I was more bold. We went back home; we were living here in Tucson. I said to my friend Cathy Lockenvitz—she ended up getting married, I know she's queerer than hell, but anyways, she ended up getting married and having children, it's—*ay*. We ended up saying, "Let's ask two girls and take them to the Dairy Queen and buy them ice creams," five cents for an ice cream cone then, and I said, "Yes, let's do that." We stole those shiny jackets that my brothers had and everything, we dressed up, and we had these two friends that were—and we went and got them. We walked to their houses and got them, then we walked to the Dairy Queen—everything was walking distance and we bought them ice cream cones. And Cathy and I were pretending they were our girlfriends, even though they really weren't in the sense of that people do those relationships but we were so—that we put that together.

Q: How old were you?

Arellano: This was probably in the same year that I had the encounter with Yolanda, I was about eight, between eight and nine, yes. And we had our own money, I earned money since I was this high, and we had our own money and we were like, oh, it's—and that felt good. [*Laughs*] And then we'd go home, and we'd run back and put the clothes before the brothers would find out that we were using their clothes. Yes, they never caught us, we were sharp, yes.

I noticed more so then that I allowed myself to feel the crushes I had on girls and to notice the attractions I had on girls, but I wasn't really focused on it, I really wasn't focused on it. Like that little thing that Cathy and I did was great and everything and then it just really cooled off for a while, and I wasn't focused on it, which that's a good age to not be focused on it, I believe you know. Because I was already settling into who I was without having to externally have it confirmed. There was a period of relaxation and—but noticing, oh, that girl is so cute or my friend is so cute or whatever and just that's—it—that's all I needed is to—I allowed myself to have those conversations with myself. Oh, isn't she cute, I like her, and things like that, yes.

Q: Wonderful, thank you, and what about the teenager years?

Arellano: The teenage years, oh my God, *¡híjole!* [wow!, good grief!]. I would never want to redo the teenage years. I just want to say I was really noticing even before the teenage years, but definitely the teenager years, I was already stealing cigarettes and smoking cigarettes and how high I got from them. Because cigarettes are a profound drug. And so I was using that, and it felt very sexy to steal a cigarette and smoke it. It felt very connected to my sensuality, but it also felt connected to my power that there was an autonomous choice that I could do something adult,

and I could make it happen, and also I used to get high, so high, *ay-yay-yay*. So anyways, I want it because that's part of my sensuality and my journey, and all the adults around us were smoking and drinking, all of them, all of them, okay? *Cigarros* [Cigars] everywhere, you didn't have to even struggle to steal a cigarette.

And let's see what else from my teenagers years? Okay, so junior high, so we moved back to Silver City, New Mexico, and I was in junior high over there, and, oh, my God, I started to fall in love with Rosemary Ortiz [*phonetic*] who also got married, *ay,* to each their own. But anyways, she was the one that her mother was having the baby while my mother was having me. Her mother was screaming, and my mother went home, so she—you know, Rosemary. Anyway, so we were fast friends while I was in junior high. She was in the gifted, she had more class privilege than me and her family and she's Mexicana. She was in the gifted; I wasn't in those classes. Well in my own way, I knew that I was gifted because I was so different, and I just had all of these spiritual experiences and thoughts and stuff, so—

Anyways, Rosemary and I, we really liked each other, we <u>really</u> liked each other, I mean it was like—oh my God. It was the first relationship that I had with that much desire, and I was in eighth grade. And I had started liking girls and had close friendships with girls, didn't have any physical encounters. It was too dangerous, I was living in Silver City, a town of five thousand, very racist, and very dangerous to people of color, so it was like, don't ever let anyone know that's going on. We hung out as much as we could, and she was making physical advances to me at that time, but I couldn't handle it, I was not ready. I was just not ready, and some of that was the fear I just talked about of—my best friend was very, very—he was definitely a transgender

woman if he was—had been here now. He's still alive, but he was what they call then, what people used to call a nelly fag, which has a lot of negative connotation, but he was—to me, he was super feminine. And they used to beat him up, so of course, I was really being careful and—

And then here comes high school and my friend Rosemary moves away to Albuquerque [New Mexico], but we're writing letters, we're writing letters. And then I have a best friend, Gloria Lopez [*phonetic*], I fell in love with her, but there—it was a platonic relationship. She was very heterosexual, but she never through our time—we used to spend regular time together. She had a car, and we used to drive and listen to music. She never canceled a date with me because of a boy, which other girls were doing, never. We were for reals best friends, I loved her so much, and I came to see her here in Tucson, and she moved to Tucson after she got married. She married a biker, and I came to see her and then I lost track of her, but I still love her to this day, and thank her to this day.

So high school in Silver City, New Mexico, there was a group of Star Trekkies, and I have never been a Star Trekkie, but I really liked them because they were weird like that, and I was weird. And so I used to hang out with them and had a crush of one of the Star Trekkies, and she used to come and pick me up because we were starting to drive all of us, and we'd go out, and she was a majorette. My best friend Gloria was a majorette and then my fake boyfriend, David Varela [*phonetic*], he was such an unusual person, he was so gay. He was a piano player like you wouldn't believe, a composer in high school, and he was a medium and a channeler, and we really were drawn to each other because of our similarities. We were interested in the esoteric and a lot of things and music and all that. We had an agreement that we're going to pretend were

boyfriend and girlfriend just to keep it safe because it was dangerous and so we were, and we used to go to dances together, and he was a drum major for our high school band, I was the snare drummer, and so we were all in that together.

And we used to go to his house and have séances, and he used to talk in perfect Latin. He didn't know Latin. We [*unclear*] blow our minds and, "What did I say?" I said, "I don't know because this is what the language was, this is what it sounded like," and he was such a scholar, he says, "That's Latin." Have you ever spoken Latin?" He said, "Never, never," so anyways.

I ran into David Varela here in Tucson from Silver City here at Sir James. It was a famous gay club that I used to go to, the first one I ever went to. I ran into him there, it was so wonderful that we ran into each other, and then I ran into Rosemary's cousin, Richard [*phonetic*], he was living here and he was gay. And the next weekend, guess what, Rosemary drives her from Albuquerque. Her cousin tells and he saw me in a gay club. She comes to collect her booty from me; she comes from New Mexico. I mean I knew what was going on. There's Richard and here comes Rosemary because we're still writing. She says, "I'm coming to see my cousin Richard in Tucson." Oh yes, right.

So anyways, she showed up and I was already drinking a lot, and I was so—it was too much for me, this HSP stuff, the over sensory was just too much for me, so I ended up—and they were there and available, and they were letting me know, they were there and available, and they hung out with me, they didn't hang out with Richard. But I was using alcohol in a way that separated us and what I felt was safety to me because I was like, whoa, this HSP stuff—I didn't know then

but now I know because I was critical of it I'm not critical of it now because—I feel things very deeply, the good, the bad, and the beautiful. So it was like, whoa, and all these years of writing and all of these feelings and—ah. So we ended up not getting together physically and then Rosemary went back and she got married a few years later to a man, and, poof, she disappeared from the writing relationship that we'd had for so many years, but that's patriarchy.

Like I said I was seventeen when I started going to that gay bar drinking and dancing and building community. And those gay bars saved our lives, and the drag queens saved my life because I could really relate to them better because they were playing so deeply with gender. And I used to watch them perform, and I learned a lot of my moves that I did. When I went in drag to do my performance stuff, I learned a lot of my moves from them. I used to loved watching them, you know.

Q: So there were drag queens at this gay bar? This was in Silver City, New Mexico?

Arellano: No, Tucson, Arizona.

Q: Back in Tucson now at seventeen?

Arellano: Yes, yes, thank you, I'm—yes.

Q: Yes.

Arellano: I'm back and—

Q: And that's great, and so you came back to Tucson. At what age did you come back to Tucson?

Arellano: Okay, so I went to Tucson for junior high, let's see, for part of junior high for eighth grade and high school for ninth grade and—was I there for tenth? And then we came back here, and I went to Sunnyside High School. I went there tenth grade, and the first time I dropped out of high school was tenth grade, and the second time I dropped out of high school was eleventh grade. I just told my parents, "I can't do." It was the homophobia, I mean I couldn't be any part of myself at the high school.

Q: Can you tell me more about the homophobia you experienced in high school here in Tucson? Can you give me some examples or tell a story about it?

Arellano: Well, the example I want to give you is societal, and you see every day everywhere. And I don't have any events where people were coming after me and calling me dyke or anything like that, but I was living in a society and because the way that some of us are, we're aware of our world. I was so aware of my world very early, and I knew by then and from living in Silver City then beating up Albert [*phonetic*] every day, I knew by then. So I was living in this state of homophobia because it permeates every damn thing, it's everywhere, and it's every day. It's like racism, it's everywhere, it's every day, I mean you just—and so.

One of the things I do want to say was in high school, I didn't like to dress for gym. I didn't like in junior high either because there was some kind of privacy that I needed and that I wanted to give the girls. You know that thing that we're wise about. I used to read palms and give readings to the teachers and then I wouldn't have to go to PE [physical education]. I would give intuitive readings to them, sometimes mediumship reading when a spirit would come through, or I'd read their palms. And they had all the teachers coming to me, not the men, the women, and that way I get to—I'd be reading. PE period, okay, I'd be sitting in the bleachers, and here comes the teacher to have a reading. That saved me because, at one point, I said, "I can't go in there and be in that environment anymore because that's not who I am," and I felt like it was disrespectful. Not that I was doing anything or anything, but it's a gender thing. It's a gender respect thing where you don't want to invade the privacy just by the presence of your energy. And I didn't want my privacy because of the presence of that energy and my privacy where I needed privacy with my body because I was different than probably anybody in my PE class, so.

Q: And this was part of your gender, your trans-ness, it didn't feel right to be in that female space?

Arellano: Yes, and even my lesbian-ness, when I was identified as a lesbian, that was part of it. That was part of it, and it was a part of the safety of—for myself but also for what if somebody finds out that I'm gay and then all of a sudden people are going to say, "Yes, I saw her staring at me at the—" I've seen that kind of stuff happen, and I was going to prevent it from happening to me. May I jump back to junior high for a minute?

Q: Absolutely.

Arellano: So thank you listeners for your patience with my choreography. So when I was in junior high in eighth grade, they were making us sew a dress. They wouldn't let me be in shop. I asked to be shop, they said, *"¡estás loca!"* I go, "No, no, I want to be in shop, I don't want to sew things" even though I did want to—I tried to learn how to sew later because I was I wanted to not because—

So anyways, my mom ended up sewing my dress, and it was this apricot satin, oh my God, it was like—we were going to have to model them in front of the study body, okay. That's when I remember the first time I had suicidal ideation, and I said, " I can't do this, I cannot do this." I have a blackout from modeling that dress, I don't remember the day, I don't remember the day after, okay. That's what an insult it was to my sacred gender. I remember telling myself, putting my hand to my heart—this was in junior high Silver City, putting my hand on my heart and saying to myself, if we know—I know this is—well, making us want to die, but if we feel this way tomorrow, we'll do it tomorrow, but not today, okay. I said that to myself hundreds of times, hundreds of times, and I still use it.

And it's not me talking to my adult, it's me talking to the aspect of me that was in junior high that—I run suicidal ideation for many reasons, but they're being called into their venue, oh yes, yes, let me bring the medicine of remembering that. That that suicidal ideation I've never really attempted, it's a medicine and it has kept me here and kept me alive, yes. And I still say, "Yes, this is—we feel this way but remember, feelings aren't facts, feelings, for the most part, are

emotions and memories, and let's just wait. So I did that and plus the alcohol, the cigarettes, whatever I was using. I'm still here, I'm still here, and as I get older, it gets harder because it becomes more plausible that that would be an option.

I wear this do not resuscitate bracelet because basically this protects me legally from them not bringing me back from the dead, which is totally against my culture, okay. And they bring people up, and they put them on machines, I've had relatives that happened to them, and we know that they do that. This is western medicine and profit and greed. So this protects me, and people aren't shocked because I'm at this age. If I was younger, they would be like ugh, but I don't ever want to be brought back or and be held here by artificial means. And that's a choice.

I just need to say this because I need to say it, is that any feelings we have about suicide that are tragic and sinful are Catholic and Christian. That we don't go to hell, hell doesn't exist except in our minds. I know somebody who died and came back and totally went to hell, but they thought they were going to hell because they were gay before they had that death experience, and they came back, and they described it to me the—like they had described it to me the first time but while they were still here. And we worked to change that. I said, "You believe in those images, that's how powerful you are." I say, "What do you want to see when you die? What do you want to experience?" So I have that part of my death worked out about what I'm asking for, what I'm wanting, and what I'm co-creating with this—was the sacred. Yes.

But I'm of Scorpio moon too, and we're very—Scorpios are all about sex and death, and in the moon, that's very powerful, so of course I'm—and I want to say that I'm an Aquarius. So when

you see the Aquarius with the pitcher of water, the pitcher is the vessel for carrying our life experience and our wisdoms, and the water pouring out of the vessel, the pitcher, is what we bring to our communities because that's our sacred path. I get really excited when I have information that's lovely and important and sexy, and I want to share it. Like when I say to people, "You know the swirls [*phonetic*] are able to collect about a thousand pounds of water in the monsoons, they stay alive the whole year because of that. And look at them, they're like an accordion. People are going, "No one ever told me. I said I know," things like that. Hurry up, bring in the information, that excites people. So that's who I am, that's who I am, and I have to—

I have really worked on consent because—and also now as an elder—elder, I really feel the motivation and called even more strongly to share those wisdoms in my life experience. And I'm very intentionally conscious because I've been that kind of a teacher where I want to bring value. I don't just want to come and have a therapy session in front of my class. If I have a therapy session, I said, "This is what happens, this is the grace I found on it," and that is that—that, what happened is how—I want to tell you how it helped me heal. Because," I said, "if—there's so much grace in our pain. One of my offerings is to teach you how to find that grace and let the pain and the grace dance together." Things like that, really giving people—

This took me years to hear and figure out and learn, and I talked about going to the Bay Area to become—to study because I became aware. My great-grandmother came to me and said, "The Bay Area, I go, *abuelita*, so much love and respect, but how do you know about the Bay Area?" She says, "I don't need to know about the area, I'm just bringing you the message." And so I

started to plan to go, and I ended up over there, and sure enough, it is one of the epicenters of queerness, of art, of Yemanjá, of dance, of teachers. Oh my God, the teachers there, some of the most incredible teachers internationally, spiritual, sacred teachers—all teachers are sacred, spiritual but yes—are there. It's an epicenter, you know that. And everything, you know, the menu is so abundant.

I wanted to study Yorubian traditions because I was invited, and it interested me, but I also was promised that it would bring me home to my indigenous cultures and to all indigenous stuff. Not that I had completely left, but I was at some of the witch things, and I was walking my way home to be rooted in my Mexican indigenous, sacred roots, so. And the most lesbians per capita, Oakland [California] when I moved there in '81, the most lesbians per capita in the world. I said, "Oh hell, yes." So I wanted to be there for that, and, oh, did I—did that pay off. That was like pay dirt for me there and—

Q: How old were you when you moved to the Bay Area?

Arellano: I arrived in the Bay Area at twenty-eight years old. I stopped drinking alcohol at twenty-nine, and I haven't had a drink since then, that's one of my time records. I consider myself a relationship anarchist, and I don't do a lot of things relationship anarchists do, but this is what I do. I have a commitment to love my friends as passionately, as deeply, and with the commitment that I have only shared with lovers in the past. And I don't mean this whole codependent, I'll send you flowers every day for a month stuff, none of that, that I used to do some pretty outrageous things for my lovers, but none of that. It's like okay, here I am, I'm

sharing my energy with you, and I—and I'm wondering if you're interested in hearing about relationship anarchy where we won't throw each other the side of the road when we get lovers, number one because that still happens. One of my best friends just got married two years ago, and I said, "Please don't throw me by the side road." They threw me by the side of the road, and I go, "okay."

But to harvest, to harvest and to give love in many, many places, to many four-leggeds, to many butterflies, to many humans, to many—to yourself but not to get caught up in the closed system, which I believe marriage, in many ways, is a closed system. Creating a nuclear family, buying your house, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And before you know it, the person is not available, and they're overwhelmed with their life, of course they're not available, and these are their priorities and their choices, and I'm not. I said, "Well, that's common and usual."

So I'm going to study this, and I'm going to have these conversations with people where it's not how you have to show up, it's a consistency of communication and honoring each other. Like I have friends I don't see but once a year, and you know what, it's like <u>incredible</u> love and depth and fun and joy, and—okay. I don't have to have that every day. Like one of my teacher says, "Do more with less" because those of us that are wounded emotionally, which is every human being, I've never met somebody that's not—where we feel those things that we lacked or didn't get, and we want more and we want more. That's so human and so brilliant; I'm not criticizing that. I'm saying being conscious of not using our loved ones to run from ourselves. Once in a while is fine, it's good, have that lost weekend, I think that's great, but I'm talking about—

There's a twelve-step program called Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, and it's kind of like an Al-Anon [Family Groups], kind of like Adult Child [Children] of Alcoholics program because it's all about people making the commitment to not use their relationships like they use drugs and alcohol.

Q: Yes. Is that a program you were a part of?

Arellano: Yes, yes, and I was never—I want to say this because it's important, is that the men in that program, the majority of them had real intense addictions to sex and the orgasms. My connection to sex being addiction was the closeness; it was the closeness. The orgasm wasn't my—the things I dreamed about, even though I love them but—so it was really different, and mine was more the abandonment and codependency in my family and society. So I wanted to be emotionally sober. I'm looking because the book's up there. I want to be emotionally sober, and I learned so much in that program about anthropology and sensuality and sexuality and relationship; that was like a whole program. And especially about the men that came in were sober and would tell their truth, would tell their truth what their lives were like, and it was like what a gift, what a gift. Those were mostly gay men of color and gay white men and it was—[*pounding on door*]—it was in the—shall we shut that?

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So let's move back to junior high school. Can you tell me about any more experiences that want to come through?

Arellano: Yes, what's coming through is I talked about modeling that dress and having a blackout and the suicidal ideation showed up. I think this is really important for—and people know this, but we need to talk about it more—is that I was sent to the office one day for laughing in my classroom, and I think I was in eighth grade. The principal was this huge, Nordic woman, huge, scary Nordic woman, really tall and really big, and she was going to paddle me, and she gave me two paddles. And they were so hard, and she was so sadistic delivering them, I didn't have that word then, but I have it now because it totally was that, sadistic, really hard, and they hurt so much, so much. So it's interesting that that time that I got the paddling and modeling the dress, they were very close together. So that's when the suicidal ideation really showed up. It was the tipping point, white supremacy, racism, whatever you want to call it, put your mind on it, end it, end it. We live with it every day, end it, thank you.

Q: Yes, thank you so much for that, yes.

Arellano: Yes, yes.

Q: And then you also mentioned that you were a drummer in high school. When and how did that start?

Arellano: Okay, so it started here in Tucson, Arizona, when I was in junior high. I spent part of my junior high in New Mexico, and part of my junior high here. I was going to Sunnyside Junior High School, and I went and signed up for band, and they let you choose the instruments, and I

asked for drumming. I wanted to learn the drums and snare drums, and I had already been drumming at home. I've been drumming since I was born with my fingers and with sticks and everything. And the male teacher said—he laughed, he looked at me and he laughed. He says, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no," a white man, "No, no, no, no, no, no," oh, you're lucky that I'm nonviolent. "No, no, no, no, no." And he said, "No, no, no, girls do not play drums!" And this is an international misogynistic struggle. It happened with the Yorubian folks in the *bata* [Nigerian drums]. Carolyn [*phonetic*], Brandy [*phonetic*], and I, we held the first women's Bimbei [*phonetic*] in the Bay Area, and she played *bata*, okay. Even the women in New York weren't doing that, we made that happen, and I experienced God that day for reals, but anyways, that's another story.

Anyways, so I said, "I'm going to come every day, I'm not going to play clarinet," and they said—they got really bold and said, "Well, what about trumpet?" because they think that's really butch. Well fine it could be really butch, I want drums, and look at it, it's connected to everything I've done with my spirituality. So finally, finally, this Mr. white dick said, "Okay, we're going to—I'm going to try you out," like that, talking to me like that, "I'm going to try you out." I go, "Well of course, that's what white people do." So anyways, he tried me out, and you know what, I could play those damn drums, and I learned to read the music so quickly, and I can read drumming music to this day, okay. So I played drums there, and he said, "No one in the state of Arizona—" He says, "I don't know where else, no, no girl has ever played drums in the state of Arizona." Okay, so there it was, break on through to the other side, baby. And so I did that.

When we went back to New Mexico because my father was having to move for jobs and things like that, we went back, and I did a couple years of high school, ninth and tenth grade I believe. I already knew how to read music, I already knew how to play drums, and the—he looked at me because there were no other girl drummers. He looked at me funny, I said, "I was a drummer in junior high in Arizona blah, blah, blah, blah, I can read music, I can—" And he says, "Okay," he says, "I'm going to put you on snare" and so he put me on snare drum. And the head of the drumming part of the band, Robby [*phonetic*] was the head. He was white guy, and he was the head of the drummers, and one day, he got sick, and it was homecoming, and I got to lead the band on to the stadium as a lead drummer, the lead snare drummer because Robby was sick and he didn't come. And I'll never forget that moment, yes, because I was the strongest drummer they had beside this lead guy, and he was good, I'm not—he was really good, but I got to do that. That was a big damn, deal, okay? So anyways—

Q: What was that like for you in your body? Can you feel back into that and describe?

Arellano: Oh, I remember. That's part of being highly sensory, highly sensitive is I can feel feelings, I can. I have so many feelings around memories, so. Oh, I remember the euphoria, and I remember the stress and the pressure too, and how I managed that and navigated that. There were two high schools there, all my peers are there, all my—and everything and everything, and I'm leading the band with the drumming. It's that faith and that trust that we have that we don't even know how to name it sometime, which I name spirit, the sacred. And there, I went, and I did such—people were talking about, that was some powerful, powerful leading of the band on to

the field with that drumming. So, yes, I was higher than a kite, it was euphoria, it was euphoria, yes.

It was really good, and I just want to say this. This was the time of Twiggy, and I was—I've had relationships with being in a fat body and not being in a fat body and in between. And I was in a semi-fat body, so that when Twiggy [Dame Lesley Lawson DB] came, the fat phobia just went sky high. That was medicine for that because dealing with so much things in early high school about all the hormonal changes and everything, hormonal—I need water—hormonal changes and everything, and I didn't have a mentor, I never had a mentor. My great-grandmother was my mentor, she died when I was twelve years old, she was my mentor, and my mother and my other grandmother have been mentors to me in some way, my aunt has been a mentor. But I've never had that kind of dedication mentor, which—that's all spirit that carried me into that field and everything and let me have that healing around that ugly, European, emaciated anorexia fad that was going on, it was so strong. I remember those things just because I was very conscious of what was going on and—yes. It really helped me with self-esteem stuff and everything and also because I'm queer, and I'm queer and I know I'm queer [*laughs*] and all of that. Thank you for making this space to say that, yes, thank you.

Q: Thank you so, so much for that and for allowing us even deeper into that story and what it was like for you.

Arellano: Yes.

Q: So you have also mentioned that when you were seventeen, you stopped going to high school, and in that same time, you also began frequenting a gay bar in Tucson and that it was a space of community.

Arellano: Yes.

Q: Can you tell us about what it was like to begin going there? Can you paint a picture for us of what it was like at this place?

Arellano: I'd love to and—but I want to step back a little bit and just say that dropping out of high school those two times saved my life, saved my life. I couldn't find a place in high school for myself. I found more of a place in New Mexico because I was in the band and I was the—and I got to drum and all that. But I came here, and it was like, the flooding in the art department, the flooding of European images and demands from the art teachers to create a European art, and all of that and teaching European art and everything. And it was like, oh my God, it's like my culture is so much, so rich. And I didn't have any peers at that high school when I came to that high school and even when I went back, I—all my peers were straight and things like that and also, I wanted to earn money and needed to earn money and wanted more freedom.

So the second time, my parents said, "Okay, we're not going to ask you to go back." And I said, "You won't be disappointed," I said, "because the day after I quit high school, I'm going right over the Pima Community College and enrolling," and I did. And they said, "Do you have a high school diploma?" I said, "Oh, yes, I do, I go okay," and then they just processed all my

paperwork. So there I was at Pima Community College, which is thriving here in Tucson, Arizona, and my father helped. He was in construction after the mines, he couldn't work at the mines anymore. He went to—he helped build that college. So that was—felt very sacred and right on to me that my father literally helped raise those walls and everything.

And so I went there, and it was a really, really—when it began, I really loved it because part of my curriculum was I helped to build the social services library, things like that. They let us form the college, do different things like that, and I was really turned on by that. And also, they had some of the most progressive radical teachers at that college. James Brown, not the one that says get on up, but James Brown was his name, African American gay man, and he was the first one to teach. I have never even heard the word transgender, okay? He brought in a transgendered woman to talk to us that have had surgical help around actualizing her gender. These are the things that got him in the most trouble; he talked about bestiality. I was studying psychology, he was teaching psychology, okay, he was teaching all of the things we wanted to know, and because there was some funding and some leadership in the college that was criticizing him and wanted to get rid of him. The other thing—

Q: What was it like for you to be in the room when this transgender woman came and presented and spoke about her experience—?

Arellano: Oh my God, oh my God, it was like, well this is why I quit high school. Thank you spirit for my parents not demanding that I go back to high school a third time. This was happening to—the next, the very semester that started after I quit high school.

Q: Do you have any memory of what is was like in your body to hear the word transgender, to hear from a person who was openly transgender?

Arellano: Well, I certainly didn't identify as being transgender then, I didn't, but I really felt related and connected, and I was so interested, so interested, and that person was so courageous and so was my professor was so courageous. And I said, "This gives me permission to expand the truth of who I really am and demonstrate it and live with it." I mean that teacher, James Brown, I still to this day—and he moved to San Francisco to work in the department of psychology at [Zuckerberg] San Francisco General [Hospital and Trauma Center], and I'll tell you why because he's a gay man, and I loved him.

He also taught us about blood sugar. People just said, "You're going to have diabetes." He taught us about blood sugar and how it impacted the psychology of our health. And that's why he got the job at the hospital to improve the diets, so he could take people out of the mental health ward that were suffering from food allergies. Blew my mind because I was one of those people that was addicted to sugar and this and that, and this and that, and this and that, and it really helped my health journey. I was diagnosed with type II diabetes, and I've been clear and free for twenty-four years with low normal blood sugars, okay.

So all of those gifts in that classroom and seeing the transwoman, and the transwoman talking as if she had a right to be here. I had to feel that because I still carry that message and was carrying it then. I wasn't made for this world or this world wasn't made for me. That kept me grounded to

the planet. And people asking, my peers that were straight in that class asking questions was really healing. Learning about it, so I don't have to do all the damn work when I come out to you.

Q: How were you presenting your gender at that time? Would you say that you were presenting in a butch or masculine manner?

Arellano: I've always presented in a butch and masculine manner as long as I wasn't at school where they said we had to wear dresses, I've always had that. I've always wanted that and had that. The only time I chased a sparkling dress was when I wanted to do drag to educate about gender as my performance art is my activism also. I never wanted those things they made me wear, not for five minutes. Yes, so that part has been very consistent for me, which is really good.

Like when I was talking to my neighbor yesterday, talking to her about trans information, a trans person moved in here, and she expressed some transphobia, so I said, "Can I talk to you about that?" and we're talking about that. And she said, "Oh, I just can't stand the way she looks," at least she was saying she because I was calling her she, you know. "She looks like a man," and I said, "Well, there's some biology that causes that," and I said, "but that's really a woman, that really is a woman." She says, "No, she's not," so anyways. And it's really good because she's very careful around—she knows I'm safe, and I was really celebrating her truth because—especially because I've seen how she shuts down around people, and she's very, very beautiful,

indigenous, very dark, all that and everything, but I see her. But she doesn't shut down around me, which really tells me, we—she feels safe with me.

So I just said this to her, I said, "If you hate her, you hate me." She says, "No!" I said, "You might not get this or understand this right now, but I'm telling you that it hurts my heart when you express hate towards queer people and people who are gender other than what you think we should be," like that. And then before I left, yes, before I left, I said to her, "You know what Lucy [*phonetic*], I'm still so grateful that you're my neighbor, and I love you."

Q: Yes, yes.

Arellano: And she was just being herself, and I left, and she's herself, and she's comfortable, and she's—you know and everything. Because I know there's other ways to teach besides creating pain, and that's what I go for. Sometimes the pain is very helpful to use it to wake people up, but she's still—she's sticking to her guns, and that's what we want for—especially people who are colonized the way we are. So I was really happy—[*banging on door*]—when I left there. I'm sorry.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: And how did you come to find this gay bar at the age of seventeen?

Arellano: Okay, well, I want to say that I got this job at PHARMASEAL [International Limited], and PHARMASEAL made surgical gloves. And I worked with so many—it was almost all women except the supervisors, and they were all brown. And we used to be on this assembly line, and we used to blow into the gloves to check and make sure they didn't have holes before they got sterilized, and we used to sing together and everything. I just have to say that because this is an important part of it. And I had my little Rambler Station Wagon that I had bought myself, and so—

My brother was married to Edna [*phonetic*], they're not married anymore, but that's not important. He was married to Edna, and Edna invited me to Sir James, which was the gay bar, and I was already working, earning my money, and blah, blah, blah, and going to school, and doing different things too, doing really too much. But anyways, it was the first gay bar. I can recall the feelings, I can recall the night, and Edna is—was a fag hag. And let me just say what the definition is, and I have permission to use that word because I'm part fag too. Is Edna would fall in love with gay men, and the terminology we're using at that time was fag hag, and it was colorful and created, and we loved it—creative and we loved it. I didn't know Edna was a fag hag until she took me to Sir James.

So the first night, I remember, oh, my God! I remember it was another feeling like the world had opened up to me, like there was a place for me in the world. And I was already drinking, but I wasn't focused on the drinking as much as I was the community. There was people there that looked queerer than me!

Q: How so?

Arellano: Oh, drag queens for one, drag queens all over the place loving us up, and some of them felt very nurturing like moms, loving us up and everything and talking so sweet to us. And there were super gay men, super gay, super gay, honey, and the way they walked and talked and danced and everything, I loved that, and there was butch dykes. The two women that ran the bar, they were a couple, and they were like—they called themselves diesel dykes, and they were both so butch, oh my God, so butch. My orientation is yin and yang where I really like feminine women and so I was fascinated by them, "Oh, look, at those two diesel dykes, they love each other so much."

And they would also threaten us, they said, "If anyone's in here underage, we could lose our liquor license, they've been harassing us, and you know what, both of us are going to get together and beat the hell out of you." Oh, my God! That scared the shit out of me. I was not a stranger to domestic violence, and so. One night, the liquor control did come in. I already had my plan, so I ran in the bathroom, and I stood on the toilet, and I locked the door, and they never came in, but they—I was told that "they're going to go in and check the restrooms." I says, "I'm going to—that's my best chance." So I never got in trouble, they never busted me. And I know I was seventeen when that happened because when my eighteenth birthday happened, I was there celebrating, and it slipped out of my mouth that I was eighteen. Somebody asked me how old I was, and I said, "Eighteen," but they said, "You're not supposed to be in here." Nobody heard, just I think one person, I said, "Please don't tell." They said, "Of course I'm not going to tell, happy birthday," but like that. That's how I remember. And Judy and Judy, one time, they liked

me so much, they invited me to their house for breakfast after the bar closed at 1:00 a.m. They used to close at 1:00 a.m.

Q: Is this the owners?

Arellano: The two diesels dykes.

Q: They had the same name?

Arellano: Judy and Judy, two Judys, isn't that ridiculous? [*Laughs*] It is, it's hysterical.

Q: What was the name of the bar and where was it?

Arellano: Sir James, it was Sir James, and it's way on the north side of town, and we're kind of on north east, but it's further north. Actually, because I'm oriented on the brown side of town and I live there most of the time, I am very close to Sir James. This is the side of town it was on, and this used to be more outskirts, it's really built up and everything, it was on the outskirts, there wasn't neighborhoods and stuff by the bar on purpose. They didn't know; they don't want us near families and stuff.

Q: Was it out on a road like—?

Arellano: Well, it was out on a main road that didn't have a lot of traffic at night or on the weekends, and it was secluded, it was secluded. And things that happen there, there were some wonderful things that happened there, I love to dance, and the music—I lived through disco honey. I'm going to tell you, I got the best of rock and roll, the '50s, the '60s, I lived through disco, I adore disco! I adore disco! And I used to go dancing at a gay disco here later after Sir James was not a disco. I have to go, I have to go find out if that bar is still there.

Q: And can you tell me about the time when Judy and Judy invited you to breakfast?

Arellano: Yes. It took a long time. They didn't let people in easily to their home and to their—so I was a regular, and I'd go every weekend and everything. And there were some of us that that was our home, that was our home, and there were people that drank, I drank, and there were people that didn't drink, but we had a home group that was very tight. There was a lot of us, but we were very tight with each other. So once in a while, the Judy and Judy would invite somebody to breakfast, one or two people to come home with them after we had been drinking, a lot of us went. We wouldn't eat before we went out drinking, we'd eat after we were done, so it was kind of traditional. They invited me and a couple of other people, and I was just like, oh, my God, I must be special, I must be special.

So anyways, we went into their house, and their house was diesel dyke-y. Like they rode motorcycles and stuff, and they had that kind of masculinity in their house, I loved it, I loved it. I go, oh, they are really diesel dykes, and they called themselves diesel dykes, and were very proud of it. And I said, "Does that mean you drove diesels?" and one of the Judy says, "No, but I

could drive any damn thing," and like that, I loved them, and so. At first, I was scared of them but not afterwards. And they fed us, and we laughed, and we talked, and they were much looser than when I'd see them in the bar and so I got to see them laugh and smile. And I hardly ever saw them laugh or smile in the bar because they were like on duty, honey. They were protecting us. Shit went down in that bar that people came and harmed us and—

Q: Can you give an example of a story of that?

Arellano: One of my friends, Gabriel [*phonetic*], he was one of the most—and once again, people, I want to say this, if anyone is listening, that that term nelly fag, don't use it, don't use it freely. People will beat you up maybe. But anyways if you're that, you can use it all you want, but anyways nelly fag was these kind of high femme gay men. And one night, two men came in the bar and picked them up because people used to come in the bar, but we talk about don't ever go with anyone, don't get picked up anyone that you don't know that comes here. But he went, and they took him to the desert, and they cut him. They cut his abdomen with beer bottles, and they left him here and left him where he was. I don't remember how he lived, but he lived. I don't remember that part of the story.

And another time, people were shooting at us when we left the bar because it's open carry state. The landlord and her wife were lesbians, they open carry sometimes. They're clueless about what it means to—for a person of color to see that. Anyways, they shot, I was coming out of the bar a couple of times when there was gunfire, and that happened. And this Tucson, Arizona, we're talking about, and it's because it's Tucson, Arizona, it's very connected, it was a

republican state and still is for the most part but not really. There are twenty-two federally recognized tribes here, and that's powerful, and there's a lot that aren't recognized. So anyways, I just want to say that and—

But we had birthday parties at that bar, we had fundraisers at that bar, we had—we cried at that bar, we—oh, it really helped me. It wasn't great to be in a bar because alcohol is not a great thing, but we were there, and like I said, it was lifesaving. I had my first lover from there.

Q: Can you paint a picture for us of what it looked like on the inside of Sir James, any particular—

Arellano: Oh God, yes.

Q: —details?

Arellano: Yes. The outside was nondescript, and it had to be that way, okay. But inside, there were signs, there was like the rainbow, the little rainbow flags and the little rainbow this, and the little rainbow that. The drag queens would glitzy it up, sometimes, you know, and they'd put sparkly things and like—it's not the Christmas tree stencil that you put on trees, but it's like that, that you put up and hang up. It was like it was dressed—it invited you to party and invited you to feel loose and to feel at home. There was nothing pretentious about it. This is what I love about that queer community—I'm saying that queer community because it's changed—is that nobody snooty came to that place. The class stuff that happens now in the gay community with gay white

men especially, it wasn't there, it wasn't there. We were all there together, all kinds of us, and we all had different kinds of childhoods and privilege and this and that and everything. But it was so relaxed and so non confrontal and non confrontive and it was just—it was family, it was family, and we mixed and we mixed deep. We didn't just get together at the bar, we had parties in our homes, we had movie days in our homes, we had barbecues in our homes and all of those things because from there, it was a nucleus. Those things were born that we so needed.

Q: So it wove community. It was a place where community could be fostered and then that—it sounds like that community really expanded into the rest of—

Arellano: We wanted to be—

Q: —the class [*phonetic*].

Arellano:—together all weekend. It wasn't fun for us as a lot of us visible clear people. We didn't want to go downtown to shop like people do on the weekends, and no, we wanted to be together. So somebody would say, "It's this weekend, it's barbecue at my house, this weekend is potluck at my house, this weekend, it's—" you know. And sometimes it was all lesbians because we did—we really liked being with the guys in the bar and that worked real good, but it didn't always work in our homes, and socially, we didn't always work. Guys really wanted to be with guys, and lesbians really wanted to be with lesbians. That's what we were calling ourselves then. And it was fine; nobody ever made an issue of it. And sometimes, there were mixed parties, and

we knew when it was a mixed party, but those weren't real often. We were really looking for relief, and a lot of times for us that are female bodied, it was meaning not being with men.

Q: And you felt that way at the time?

Arellano: Well—

Q: Or was it more of the—

Arellano:—I'm not sure—

Q: —feeling?

Arellano: —[01:36:07] it was my idea, but it was the idea that made sense to me at the time because I wanted to go where I felt safest and I wanted to go where I was valued and I wanted to go where I was pursued.

Q: Could you tell us about this finding of your first lover at Sir James?

Arellano: Yes, oh, Teresa, my dear friend, she's transitioned, and I think she was twelve years older than me, and she's gone because she would be ninety-two or something, eighty-two or eighty-four or whatever. But anyways, Teresa is a beautiful soul and spirit, just I was lucky that it was with somebody who is committed to the goodness in their heart. They were very butch,

and I just was not attracted to the physical image—oops. And she was relentless, and I'm codependent, and when I told her, "Look, we're not going to be together that way," she hit the windshield with her fist and cracked it. That put me in a codependent stupor of safety, and I said, "Okay, we can try being together," okay, because that was my life-saving reaction growing up and in the world and other places, and so.

And I knew she was good because I had hung out, we'd all hang out together and everything. And so I gave it my best shot, and I knew I was going to be safe, and it was good even though she did this, she didn't do that ever again. We did have one physical altercation, that was it, and I just said, "I promised myself I would never engage in domestic violence, goodbye," and I left. And she was totally saying, "Yes, it's time, definitely," and it was around alcohol and—but for the most part, we didn't do that and—

Q: How long were you together?

Arellano: A couple, three years, and friends for many, and friends for many, three years maybe, friends for many, and we moved to Phoenix [Arizona] and lived there. She opened a barbershop there, and that was a journey and an adventure, and we came back here. One night she called me Otto [Ludwig] Preminger, and I said, "Why are you calling me Otto Preminger?" She says, "Because you want to direct our sex," I go, "Well, you want to direct our sex too." She says, "Yes, but I'm who I am," I said, "Yes, I'm who I am." And I had long hair, so there was some wishful thinking. I had long hair a lot when I could grow it and braids and things like that, just

to—playing myself that way. Yes, yes, mostly really good stuff and was friends and made efforts to see her when I came here until she was transitioned, so yes.

Q: Wow.

Arellano: Thank you, Teresa. See, I remember when I got my degree, my bachelor's degree, I had a party over there, and I had a party here. She was there, and it was a good choice to get close to her and—yes. And that was very early, I was just coming out and coming out more and coming out more, and really taking some charge of my gender. Because that long hair gave me permission to shape-shift a lot depending on what I would put on, and I needed that shapes-shifting safety still then, yes. And I still need it, and I shape-shift without having to put on the long hair or the clothes, those clothes, I know how to shape-shift, and I can dive into the masculine.

I was in Oakland once on the bus because I got rid of my car six years ago or something, and I've been on buses and BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] and all that. And I was on the bus, and I'm wearing my favorite hat and everything, and an African American elder man gets on. He's wearing a dapper little hat, he looks a little dapper himself, I'm looking dapper, and he says, "Hey, what's happening OJ [*phonetic*]?" [*Laughs*] And because I wanted to be fully in the experience, I put my hands together—he sat not far from me—and I just went like this. I didn't use my voice because, there wouldn't have been a scene or anything, I just wanted to fully embrace what was happening, so. So, yes, I go, all right, and so.

Yes, this gendering stuff that we're experiencing, those of us who are experiencing, it is about being shape-shifts—shape-shifters, shape-shifters. And we all do it in our own way, but we are shape-shifters, that's a medicine. When I saw your picture, that's some intense shape-shifting. Yes, yes, and very powerful if we know how to use it, and you certainly know how to use it. It's a medicine, it's for us, it's for our safety, it's for our development, it's for our well-being to be shape-shifters.

Q: Is there anything more you would like to describe about your experience as a young adult living in Arizona before deciding to move to the Bay Area?

Arellano: Let's see. Well, I knew I had to get out of here for different reasons and went out for what I wanted too, you know. I really didn't want to be drinking as much as I was drinking. I've always been very committed. I mean I started juicing raw vegetable juices at seventeen years old and giving my whole family raw vegetable juices because—and doing bodywork on the women. I mean I've been doing this—I've been carrying. I have the privilege of carrying some medicine and them working through me. So I didn't like that I was drinking, I never liked it, I didn't like that I smoke cigarettes and things like that and—

So anyways, I was drinking, and I promised myself and I made that that commitment with myself and with ancestors and with spirit that help me get to the Bay Area, I'm going to stop drinking. I need to do it, and I need the studies that are there, and I want the studies and the queerness and the art and the ocean and the—all of this and everything. Because this used to be ocean, and I felt Yemanjá since I was child living here. I felt her, and I asked one day, I said—I

didn't know it, and I asked somebody. I asked an older person, I said, "Did this used to be ocean?" and they go, "Oh, yes." So for all of those reasons, and—I'm very distracted because I need a bio break.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center | Session Number: 2

Narrator: Tupili Lea [E.] Arellano | Location: Tucson, AZ

Interviewer: Caro De Robertis | Date: September 28, 2022

Arellano: Okay, here we are together. I'm so grateful for this, and I just want to start by saying that at the top of my spiritual practices is gratitude, and I really want people who hear this to know this. That this is one of the most powerful medicine tools I've ever encountered, so it's to be grateful. So my song is gratitude all day, all night, and everything, and my handle is Bird of Prayer [*phonetic*]. So gratitude is really easy to experience and talk about, so I'm giving gratitude for this process of this oral history being taken. I'm so grateful because I'm in my third trimester, I'll be seventy-one in January. And I wanted to leave something, and I'm so grateful it's going to be in the James [Arthur] Baldwin archives, oh my God, at Columbia [University] and so thank you. And thank you, Carol, for this, and so I want to talk a little bit about right before I got—I went to the Bay—came to the—went to the [San Francisco] Bay Area [Northern California] and some things that happened to here in Tucson [Arizona], okay.

So I want to say this is, is that I didn't talk a lot about this, but I've been sober forty-one years, and I want people to know that that alcohol is a tool of genocide and to be super aware of that, and that sobriety is possible. So I want to say that and honor myself for that. And I want to say that I was doing some social justice activism here in Tucson, and that's been one of my paths, and I know it. So anyways, some of what we were doing is we formed—we were complaining about the stuff here, so I said, "Let's take that energy and let's just make it work." So we formed

the Women of Color—it's a word that starts with a C—was it a coalition—something like that, I can't remember. But anyways, we chose our political fights, our social justice activism, and one of them was food, to make sure people had good food and then—and the other one was to address the domestic violence and sexual abuse of women.

And so this is the story that I want to tell you is that before—not long before I came to the Bay—before I went to the Bay Area, I moved in with these two—well, I moved in—let me just talk about Saturn [*phonetic*]. She was a radical, radical dyke from the Womyn's land in Arkansas, and the Womyn's land that I heard about was the first Womyn's land I heard about where men were not allowed was the Womyn's land in Arkansas. And the women that were there were very radical, and the women that were being educated there came out ready to work on the streets and do whatever. So Saturn was one of those women completely committed, right? So we befriended each other. I don't even remember how we met, but I worked for the Tucson Natural Foods Warehouse [*phonetic*], and Saturn was a collective member. Meaning she was one of the owners of the largest natural foods warehouse at that time because there wasn't a lot of natural food options then and so she had some power there, you know?

Q: Yes.

Arellano: And so one of the things we did at the warehouse was we—Saturn and I and my friend Dodi [*phonetic*], who's an ancestor now, we would go to the warehouse once a month and fill her van full of food and then we'd bring it to the south side of town and distribute it. So that was

some of what we were doing in terms of the food justice. And, of course, we never got caught because Saturn is one of the owners of the warehouse and the business.

So the other thing I want to say—this is the story—is that I was very aware and very committed to ending abuse against women and children and especially the sexual abuse. So I'm a survivor, and I knew then—even then because I had access to teachers and I had access to people who really loved and helped me, I knew that if I did this work, I could take my anger and my rage and put it there instead of letting it eat me up. So we did things like I worked at the—at [Saint] Ambrose [Roman Catholic] Church here at the domestic violence shelter, I helped start another shelter, I helped things like that. And one of the things we did, too, was I moved in with Saturn, and Saturn's girlfriend lived there, another white lesbian, they're both white lesbians. And I moved there, and I was in relationship with a Puerto Rican lesbian, and so she used to come out and hang out there with us, and I had a room in the back with its own bathtub, ah.

And so one night, Saturn is there with her sweetheart and Maria [*phonetic*]. Maria comes over and so we're taking a bath together and then we're going to bed, we're going to bed. So when we were already asleep, I heard a woman crying. I heard a woman crying, and I got up to see because it was not far from my room back there. And I had already become aware that in the back house there, there were three men living there together and that they were bad, bad news, okay. And so anyways, I hear the woman crying and I get up, I put my clothes on, and I go outside, and I meet her, and she's crying, and she's saying, "They won't give me my panties," okay, so.

And she recognized me, I recognized her because I used to hang at Armory Park where a lot of natives used to hang downtown Tucson. So we had recognition, and I don't know if she recognized me because she was so traumatized, but I recognized her. I talked to her, I asked her could I put my arm around her, and she said yes. So I walked her to our house and to the front door. I said, "I'd like to invite you in," I said, "There—there's only women here," and she said, "Yes," so she came in, and Saturn was there and so were the other women. And I asked her, I said, "These are your options, what do you want to do?" And there were women there that were worked, like we all worked in this, "Do you want to go to the hospital because they will test you and gather evidence and stuff like that to go after these men?" because she told me it had been three men, and she says, "No, I don't want to go to the hospital." I said, "I don't blame you." And then she told me, "I have a sister." I said, "Do you want to call your sister?" She says, "Not yet." She says, "I want to call the police." I said, "Okay, we can do that."

So we called the police, and two cops came in their cop car, and one was a woman—a white woman and a white man, even though I was praying silently for people of color—a white woman and a white man. I asked our friend did—was it okay if I went out and talked to them first, and she said, "Please do," and I went out and I talked to them. I told them what happened, and I told them about the bad men doing all this in the neighborhood for a long time. They said, "Could we meet her and ask her a couple questions?" I said, "Yes, but I'm not going to ask you to come in the house, I'm going to ask you to stay on the porch," and they did. And we opened the screen door, and she saw them, and they saw her, and she gave a little recap and then I—at some point, I said, "That's enough and let's go outside and talk." So she went back and was drinking tea and being with the women.

And I went out there, and I said, “What can we do to press charges, what is the procedure?” And they said, “You know what, we know her, she’s a habitual drunk, you can’t press charges, it won’t hold up.” Okay, okay, okay. So I says, “Okay, thank you very much, you can be on your way,” just like that, and they left. Oh, I was so on fire with rage, so I says, I got to use this, I’m not going to carry it in my body. So I went back in, and we talked to her and said, “Are you ready to call your sister?” I said, “Because they said they’re not going to help you press charges.” And she said, “Let’s call my sister.” So we waited for the sister to come and pick up our friend, and the sister came and the sister spent a little bit of time hearing everything that had happened and took her to her house to be with her.

And so after they had left, I said to my friend Saturn, “I need to do something, I have all of this range and anger and inspiration to do something about this.” And we knew they were still in their house, we knew they were there, and the house was not far from us at all, and it was a little—a two-room house in the back here. And so I said, “This is what I want to do.” I said, “I want to burn that house down because if I don’t burn that house down, my body will burn itself down. I need to put this somewhere.” And so my friend Saturn said, “Yes, and I have a gun.” I said, “I know you have a gun,” and I said, “Listen, white girl, I know you have a gun, I know it has six bullets, don’t you dare harm them physically, we’re not going to harm them physically, but we’re going to torture them, we’re going to give them an experience they’re never going to forget, and they will be afraid to walk in this neighborhood.”

And so we planned it, and I said, "Remember," I said, "I'm going to have this." I got a *Tonantzin* candle, a *Virgen de Guadalupe* candle, and I lit it, and I got a can of barbecue fluid lighter, and Saturn had her gun. And she says, "Can I show the gun?" I said, "Not right away but absolutely. And you'll know when to show it," I said, "because I want them never to forget this, I am so angry." So anyways, we went over there, and we knocked on the door, and nobody came to the door, so I like *Kojak* kicked the door in. I kicked the door in, and we went in there, and there they were because they heard the cops coming, the siren. The cops put their siren on to come to the—because it was south—it is South Tucson where we were. It's its own little city, and it has the reputation for being the most dangerous part of Tucson because it's all people of color.

So anyways, they knew something was up, and they were still there and so we went in, and I just started cussing at them and saying, "You MFs [motherfuckers], you just raped a woman, okay, so we're going to burn your house down with you in it," that's what I told them. "Were going to burn your house down with you in it." So I opened the can of lighter fluid, and I started spraying it in the house, and I sprayed it on their pant legs and on their boots. And Saturn took her gun out, and she started waving it, and I said, "My friend wants to shoot you, but I want to burn you." And then I just started saying to them how dare them that they were raping women and this wasn't the first time and what kind of sick, despicable people were they? And they deserve to die because they were dangerous, and they were causing harm, and we were going to—we're going to burn them with the house down, and they were believing it, I mean they were like—and these were all brown men you know?

Q: Yes.

Arellano: We talked to them. Saturn said things to them, too, that they wouldn't forget that were just—oh. So anyways, I'm spraying the lighter fluid all over the house and everything, and I said, "Okay." I said, "I want you to get on your knees and ask for forgiveness because I want you on your knees when I light the house on fire" because I know Catholic torture, I was raised a Catholic. And they did, they got on their knees, and Saturn—they were so scared that Saturn went around and pointed the gun at each one's face. And I said, "Don't shoot them because dying by fire is a more painful death, I want them to die by fire," so she backed off, so.

Anyways, so then I said, "Let's get out the house because we don't—I'm going to light it on fire now," and I have that candle burning and I already put all the—and threw the can there and real dramatic. And anyways, so we backed out, we went out, there's only one door in the house, we walked out the front door, the only door, and then we stood. She stood to the left, I stood to the right, and we just stood there, and I just motioned to her to be quiet, to not make any noise. We stood there, it might have been five or ten minutes, it was a long time, okay. They thought we were gone and then they started coming out of the house, and I said, "MFs, you better run." And we backed up, and I lit the house on fire, and they had just barely left out the house and the fire—the house went on fire, right. They headed for the desert, and Saturn ran after them and started shooting at them. So she used all the bullets, but she shot at their feet, nobody got hit because I told her, "I'm not going to jail for your craziness, so don't kill nobody."

So we backed off because the fire really got big. It was so hot, we backed off, we went into our house, we went back into our house. The men were running—still running in the desert. I said to

the women, “Did you call up and get bail money” I said, “because we’re going to go to jail,” and they said, “Yes, we made some calls, we have we have money and everything” because we—before we left, we asked them to do that. So all of a sudden, I hear [*imitates sound of sirens*]. Here comes the fire truck, right? So by the time the fire truck—because it was a really small house and it was junk inside and everything, the house was almost already burned to the ground. By the time they got there, the—because I could see the house from my window, my bedroom window—it was burned to the ground, but it was still flames, but their house was gone by the time the *bomberos* [firemen] got there. I was very happy, I said, “Oh, thank goodness.”

And they got there and they—and here comes [*imitates sound of police car*], and it was the same two cops, the same two cops, okay. And then one of the neighbors comes that live next door to us from the house and is talking to the cops. And the cops are looking at our house and looking away, looking at our house and looking away. And so then after the fire was out and the *bomberos* left, the firemen left and the fire people left and then they left, the cops left, they left! Some of that was totally ancestral and spirit. We didn’t go to jail, they didn’t even come and talk to us again, I never saw them again, okay.

So the next morning, one of our friends from the neighborhood, it was a person that knew everything that was going on. She used to come over, and she was also a sex worker in our neighborhood, and that was another reason she knew everything that was going on. She came over because she used to come over and have coffee and smoke marijuana with us. So she came over and we’re drinking coffee and smoking marijuana, and she says, “Did you hear about the fire?” I says, “Of course, we could feel it, we’re so close, what did you hear, what did you hear?”

And she said, “Well, what I heard was that these men that lived there, that they are—they’re saying that they owed money to some bad men, and the bad men came, and they didn’t have the money, so the bad men burned down their house.” They were so freaking embarrassed that two dykes had terrorized them and burned their house and put the fear in them, and so it was like we never got in trouble. And they never rebuilt the house. Sometimes I still pass by, and there’s no house back there where there was a house, and that was my wish.

And I just need to say there, right nearby, there was a bar called The Shamrock, and it was a native bar. It was where the natives went to drink, and it was a very hard-core bar. I had been in there a couple of times because I wanted to know what was going on in the neighborhood when I moved there. So I just want to say, that’s where they were going, and they were getting women, and bringing them home to—so anyways, that’s the story.

Q: And what was it like for you in your body to have—and the night that you burned down the house and then later when you heard what people were saying about it in the neighborhood? How did you carry that experience in your body?

Arellano: Well, first and foremost, I wanted to do more of it, and we were already doing stuff. Like we were flyering at people’s jobs, at men’s jobs who were raping women, we are flyering all the—putting flyers on all the cars that said—with the picture of the man because we would take—and then it was—we had cameras. We’d take a photo of the person, and we’d make flyers, and we’d paper the parking lot saying, “This man is a rapist, he works with you,” things like that.

I love doing things like that, but I was ready to burn more houses down, I was ready to—oh. I was ready to have physical combat. I never did, but I really wanted to.

And I carried that, and I used that fuel for some of the work I was still doing here with food justice. And the Food Conspiracy [Co-op] on Fourth Avenue [Tucson, Arizona] is the best natural foods store here, and we integrated that work space. Not the woman that helped me burned down the house, but we had a Women of Color Collective [*phonetic*], whatever we called ourselves. We integrated the warehouse, and we integrated the co-op. And they're not integrated anymore because—you know?

Q: Oh, yes. And looking back from this moment in this chapter in your life that you're in currently, what does that experience of burning down that house mean to you now?

Arellano: Well, I want to drive by there. I haven't driven by there since I've been back. I want to drive by there and see what I feel and what I—what comes to my intuition. That's first because I've been really wanting to go. And the other thing is—this is what it's bringing up, so I'm just going to say it okay—when I got here, and I really—I mean one of the reasons I left Tucson was because of the republican state but also the racism and more and more white people are moving here. And just politically, it wasn't—I needed a progressive political place, and I needed to feel safer because I had been targeted because of my gender and the way I looked.

When men sometimes when I was out drinking, because I definitely was in my alcoholic days, when I'd go to a straight bar, especially if I was a cis [cisgender] woman or a cis-looking woman

and men got—they reacted possessive that that woman belonged to them and what was I trying to do as a butch dyke, as a masculine person, and I had threats and stuff. I had my convertible—the top of my convertible cut up because of that, I had somebody come after me with a beer bottle, I had a gun pointed at me, things like that. So I needed to get out here because I was in my twenties, and I wanted to get sober, and I did. And I also wanted to have teachers, and I wanted to have more queerness, I wanted to have art, I wanted to have the ocean, I wanted to have the Bay Area, and I got messages, spiritual messages. I was planning on going to the Bay Area about a year before I actually went because I had already gotten those messages because I was suffering here, you know.

And I had a lot of good experiences. I also was a DJ [disc jockey] here for women's dances and stuff, and I think I was the first—one of the first female-bodied deejays that I heard of because I never saw another female deejay one—in those days. That was 1976 or something. So anyways, I want to say that because that's an important part of my life. I needed to go to a place where I could study, where I could learn, where I could heal, where I could grow, and at that time, Oakland [California] per capita, was the city—internationally, the city that held more lesbians per capita, so I said, "Woo-hoo, bring them on." And also the ocean, I've always felt very connected and the art, and the teachers. It's one of the epicenters for, first of all, very progressive commitment to social justice, and the art, the art is phenomenal and the queerness and our celebrations. There were many choices that I had of places where I could go where I didn't have to deal with heterosexuals. Those places were already established before I got there, and the people committed to—we were committed to keeping each other safe in ways that I never experienced here.

Well, in the Women of Color Collective, I did experience that safety, but I'm talking in the bigger picture of Oakland especially and then there's San Francisco and then there's Berkeley [California]. There's people there that are more conscious than anyone I have found here, and I have found some conscious people here in Tucson, not many, but I needed that, and I needed to feel safe in my queerness, you know, and I did feel safer there.

Q: So you arrived in the Bay Area in in 1981?

Arellano: Yes.

Q: Can you talk about what your life was like in your first months or years in the Bay Area?

Arellano: So on the trip here, I just want to say this because this is who I am, like I got rid of a lot of my stuff because I didn't want to be weighted down. My sweetheart was coming with me, and her mother's stuff was in storage here because her mother lived here for a while in Tucson and so her mother asked, could we bring her stuff and then we brought Maria's stuff. So I rented the biggest truck that you could legally drive without a special operator's license, right, and we put all of Maria's stuff in there, her mother's stuff and some of mine, I didn't have a lot, which I didn't want to bring a lot of stuff. And I drove that truck, and I had my Volkswagen, towing my Volkswagen. And I did the driving because I didn't trust anyone else to drive because sometimes I'm like that. I backed up that sucker into Marias' mother's garage, and we unloaded it, and then we took it.

We drove it to Oakland, so. And it was in the heat of summer and, oh God, it was a really intense trip. But I just want to say, my fierceness and my young body and how I used it and everything, I mean I could do anything, especially because I was in my twenties, and I—my body wasn't wrecked yet, and it's still not wrecked, but I was drinking. That was another reason I was going to quit drinking, I was not going to wreck my body like that. We drove into Oakland with that big-ass truck, and we found a storage space. We took the stuff, put it in storage and I took that truck and back to where it was supposed to go and then we went and stayed where we were going to stay. We had a place to land.

It was white people in Berkeley, and one of the men that lived there was out of town traveling, was a very good friend of Maria's, the woman that came with me, we stayed in their room. We had a place to stay, and right away, the white people are telling us, "You cannot listen—you can only listen to one radio station in this house, and was KPFA [PaciFicA]." And I knew, I knew some of the intensity of the influence of a radio station and media like that, but I didn't know it that much. But also, I wanted to play those wild Mexican stations and stuff too, you know, and everything, but they said, "Not in this house, not in this house." And I could forgive them because you know what, they were serious activists. They were serious, and they were walking the walk, they weren't just talking the talk, and we're in their home.

So anyways, we did that for a while until Kirk [*phonetic*] came back and then we went to crash at an African American lesbian's house, and she only had one bedroom and an office. She was a physician, an MD [doctor of medicine] and so that was the class difference, which really

impacted it. So we ended up sleeping on a really hard floor in her office in a really tight space, and we were really grateful to have that. But the accommodations were really harsh in some way, and the class stuff was really harsh even though it wasn't intentional. This was an African American woman who was a doctor, and she was very different than I, and Maria came from a different class too. Maria came from upper-middle-class also, and I didn't, so anyways. And I was in the throes of alcoholism. Now, I was still so functional, but I was struggling.

I got a job while we were sleeping on her floor at the ARC, Association for Retarded Citizens [of the United States]. We don't use that word retarded anymore, do you hear me? I got a job there and because I had been working with developmentally disabled people in Arizona, so I got that job right away. And I got fired because I couldn't make it to work on Mondays because I was medicating heavily with alcohol during the weekend and I was missing Mondays, and so I got fired because I had this disease, this illness. So I says, "Okay, I'll get another job, but you watch." I was the first one to get a job, I was the first to bring money home and all. That's class stuff, and I don't even remember when Maria got a job but anyways—

And then I got another job, I got another job, and I want to say I was working for Regional Center of the East Bay, and I was working with independent living with developmentally disabled adults. And my job was to travel train them, to teach them how to get to their jobs on the bus and not get lost, people that were functioning at that level and could do that. I had a lot of success at that job, and I loved it, and they made me a trainer of the trainers. And I was making really good money, really good money so then I was able to get my apartment, and Maria moved in with me.

And after we had been there for about a month or something, I said to her, "You have to go because I'm going to get sober and you're not interested in that, I have to go—you have to go." And Maria went to live with Avacha [*phonetic*], her lover in San Francisco, so she had—because we were in an open relationship and we weren't really being lovers at that point, but she had a place to go, and I started my sobriety, I started my sobriety. And it took me a year to successfully stop doing the drugs and the alcohol that I was doing, and that changed everything, that changed everything. Can we take a bio break please?

[INTERRUPTION]

Arellano: So I just had a bio break, so I'm just going to start by saying, once again, *Gracias a la vida, gracias a la vida* [*Thanks to life*]. I studied with folks in the Bay Area, and they taught me how to find the grace in everything, every *chingazo*, every *cerote*, everything. You know what a *cerote* is? It's a turd. That we find the grace because that turd is fertilizer, it really is, and in the dung of deer and everything, like up on Mount Lemmon [Arizona], that's where you find the mushrooms, more of the mushrooms, you know? So I'm just saying that I learned to do that.

So everything changed when I quit drinking. Right before I quit, I wanted to say I was building community in the Bay Area. I was just form the south west, from this town here, and it was a big, big, big, big deal that I arrived in the Bay Area, and I was so grateful and happy and felt so isolated by the alcoholism. Alcoholism is a disease of isolation. And also, I was building community on top of everything, being new, and all of it. So anyways, I got kicked out of

Ollie's, which was well a favorite East Bay Oakland lesbian bar, and I was mortified. I was mortified because that's the first time I had been kicked out of a bar for being drunk. First time I've been kicked out of a bar period. So anyways, I was saying, God, what a beautiful plan to get sober, and we're totally going there, so. So like I—

Q: What was it like at Ollie's? Can you paint a picture of this—

Arellano: Oh my God—

Q:—lesbian bar—

Arellano:—it was happening!

Q: —in the early '80s?

Arellano: It was so happening! Ollie's was famous, and Ollie [Oliveira,] had a good rep [reputation] for the most part, a white woman that owned it, and I'm just going to say it was so diverse, which I loved. It was so diverse and the music was great, and there's a big dance floor in the back, so I liked a lot of space to dance. So I was like in heaven because I didn't get kicked out the first time or the second time or the third time I went. It was after I had been there a few times, you know?

Q: Where exactly was Ollie's?

Arellano: Ollie's is on Telegraph Avenue near Fortieth Street [Oakland]. Now it's the East Bay Church of Religious Science where I studied with teachers there after I had been sober many years. And I used to laugh because I was sitting in the same room where we used to dance and do drugs and do alcohol and be wild. That was my church, so.

Q: Could you paint a picture for me, you said Olllie—or for us listening, future listeners as well, Ollie's was very diverse in terms of the people who came.

Arellano: Yes.

Q: Can you give us some examples? Can you paint a picture of who was there in that time?

Arellano: That's where I met some of my buddies that I still know. You walk in, and the first thing you see is the bar, and in the back is that big room where you can really spread out. But what I saw and heard was I heard music I loved when I walked in, and I saw lots of lesbians and dykes, which I love, and all colors, and even some variance in ages. There were older people than me there because I was like twenty-eight years old. And people were really friendly, really friendly and welcoming and taking me in and saying, "I just moved here," "Well, come on and want to dance?" and all of that. It was a good place for us, it was a good place for us, and I felt safe there. And the only reason, like I said, I got asked to leave was because I was not navigating my physical body as well as I would have been if I hadn't been drinking. I wasn't even being

obnoxious to anybody, but I was stumbling and stuff, they said, “It’s time for you to go,” so anyways.

And Ollie wasn’t, in any way, extraordinarily oppressive to me when she escorted me out, you know what I’m saying?

Q: Yes.

Arellano: And I remember that, so. And it was where we would meet, we’d say, “Hey, are you going to Ollie’s this weekend and la-la-la, and who’s deejaying and la-la-la.” And sometimes they had a deejay, and sometimes they just had recorded music, but we’d meet there, and there was space. That big room in the back was so big, and there’s a stage back there and everything.

I went there after I was sober and had some sobriety, I went there, that’s how safe I felt. And I went there with buddies who were also getting sober and everything, I didn’t go by myself, but yes, it was a good place, it was a really good place for us. And I don’t remember when it closed down and how it closed down, I just don’t have that memory, but it did, it did. And down the street was the White Horse Bar, and it was a really mixed bar. Ollie’s was all women, and down the street was men and women. So from Ollie’s, I went to the White Horse, and it was really different. I didn’t feel the things at the White Horse that I felt at Ollie’s, so. And I was glad the White Horse existed, but I was the point where I was disgusted with drinking, my drinking.

Q: And then you got sober and everything changed.

Arellano: I started to get sober, yes. When I started to get sober, everything changed, and what I mean is that immediately, the body starts detoxing. Because I'm like I am, I did all the research before I got sober to make sure I didn't have a medical emergency because some people, they get sober, they get the DTs [delirium tremens], they got to go to the emergency room, and I knew I wasn't have to, and I didn't, I didn't have any medical emergency. So my body responded immediately. I'm twenty-eight, I'm young, I'm really healthy. My body the—I could feel I was detoxing and I did have cravings. And I was a smoker too, so I noticed my smoking increased, and that was on my list to quit, too, later, and yes. Yes, it was intense, it was intense, but nothing I couldn't do. I could get through the big cravings and everything, and some of that was through eating sugar. I noticed at the early AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] meetings I went to, they had coffee and donuts, and tons of them, tons of donuts, you know. So it is a drug that we go from because alcohol is fermented sugar—that we go from quitting drinking to eating donuts and drinking coffee at the AA meetings, those of us that went to AA, yes.

Yes, things started changing right away, and I met some beautiful, sober women. One of my friends, Gayle Kissen [*phonetic*], who was my friend for many years, and I'm not in touch with her anymore, but they were meeting, Women for Sobriety [*phonetic*]. She had started a group called Women for Sobriety that didn't have the twelve-step nonsense at Pacific Center [for Human Growth], which was—it's still alive in there, and it's a gay center.

And I went there and one night, and I thought I wasn't—that was the first year of getting sober. I was drinking some of the time like I'd have a beer or two just to take the edge off, and I thought

I could hide that. And so one night, I went and I talked to her and I said, "I want to confess to you that I've been drinking some beers," and she says, "I know, you're still welcome here." And I was welcome because it wasn't a place to go drunk or anything, but it was a place for people that were really serious about their sobriety, and her and I became best friends. She's a musician, so I got to play music with her, an incredible musician, drummer, a guitar player, songwriter, and she gave me a place to stay in her home in Berkeley. She lives on Hearst Street—lived on Hearst Street, and that was a helpful relationship.

What happened when I was staying at her house was at eight years old I started having urticaria, which is serious hives. I remember the first time since I had been back, I was doing my best not to drink and hardly drinking, and I broke out in hives, so I was having to deal with that. They took me to the emergency room as a child when I had them, so I knew how to deal with them, and—but it was a lot of discomfort. They'd start small and they'd be huge, and so I remember more reason to get sober and promised. And I knew then because I had read a bunch about Chinese medicine and actually wanted to go to acupuncture school once I came to the Bay Area and decided not to finally because it was too much for me. But I knew about—that the lungs hold grief and that cigarette smoke, it pushes down all of the grief, and it stores it in the lungs and in the body. And that was part of the hives because the skin is our lungs, it's our lungs, it's part of our lungs, and so.

I had all these plans, and I was really glad. I did good for myself of really getting my health together. And I started building the community, and I wanted to build that community from sobriety because there were women really struggling like I had been struggling with drugs and

alcohol, and I knew who they were. And I love them, and I had so much compassion because of my own journey, and I avoided them because I needed to do that for my own sobriety.

Q: And one of the ways that you built community in this period of your life in the Bay Area was through activism.

Arellano: Oh, absolutely.

Q: Right? Can you talk about some of the social justice activism or work with organizations that you did during that time?

Arellano: Here in the Bay Area?

Q: In the Bay Area.

Arellano: Did you hear I said here in the Bay Area? I'm in Tucson, hello. Yes, in the Bay Area, I sure did. So one of them is that I worked with the developmentally disabled community and was an advocate for them already coming from Arizona over there. And all of my work was nonprofit work. The whole time I was there I worked for nonprofits and got to do a lot of learning, but a lot of advocating. And what other social justice? Well, I was one of the visionaries and founders of Mujerio, so we're bringing home. And I want to say the definition of Mujerio because I didn't know that word until the woman taught me, one of the women in Mujerio taught me. She says, "It's when so many ways *mujeres* gather, so many, I can't even tell you a number, but it's like

incredible, Mujerio, you know?" That was some social justice, and I and I was still early in recovery. The first six years are early recovery, okay.

Q: Yes.

Arellano: And so this is really good. Margarita Benitez who was a social justice activist who was a Puerto Rican dyke, her and I really connected and became friends and also was sober. And so at one of the meetings of Mujerio, people come over, and I remember I made tamales for one of the meetings and everything, and people were like just, "Do you have any extra I could take home?" and I was like, "Ah." They were so good, they were so good because I know how to make tamales.

And anyway, so after the meeting, Margarita stayed back, and she got me privately. I was living with my lover, Hannah Martin [*phonetic*] who was my best friend for thirty-nine years. Thirty-nine years, we were lovers, best friends, and everything, and she transitioned—hi, Hannah. She transitioned a little over two years ago, which was a huge loss for me, and I just was shocked, I couldn't believe, she wasn't even old enough I mean, so anyways.

Margarita took me aside after the Mujerio meeting, and she said to me, "I really want you to go to AA." I says, "I've tried it and I can't stand it, I can't stand it, all those white, arrogant la-la-la," whatever my excuses were. And she said, "I'm going to send you to a people of color meeting of queer people." I said, "It exists? It exists?" and she says, "Yes, and it's been going for a while," and she says, "You're a dry drunk because the removal of alcohol is just one thing. If

you don't do the work, you're going to continue to behave like an alcoholic, think like an alcoholic." And I loved her so much, she could tell me anything, I respected her and loved her and trusted her, and she ended up transitioning from AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome] a while after, and I loved her so much time. Hi, Margarita, muah. And anyways, I started going to this people of color AA meeting every Saturday 10:00 a.m., and I got my first sponsor, Donald [*phonetic*], African American man who had been sober so many years, and I stuck, and I stayed, and it helped me so much, it helped me so much.

Q: Wow.

Arellano: It was, yes.

Q: That's so important.

Arellano: Yes, and—yes.

Q: Can you tell us a little about the impact that you've seen Mujerio have on queer and lesbian community or culture?

Arellano: Yes, yes. First of all, I want to say that we had a newsletter, and I was "Ask Doña Marimacha [*phonetic*]." I was the secret, you know, Ann Landers of the Latinx queer women, and I had my column in that newsletter, and they—they'd write in the news. They'd write to me and send me—we didn't have email then folks believe it or not—write to me and send me

questions that I would answer in Mujerio newsletter. So that was so much fun, and that newsletter was really a connector and connective because I noticed it called in more members to Mujeria—Mujerio after we established that newsletter.

And I just want to say, I want to just shout out appreciation so deep, deep, deep for the founders of Mujerios and the ones that organized it and run it—ran it. And just the commitment there and the commitment to give ourselves space, a space as Latina then, we were Latina, as queer women of color with origins in—from the Americas, and this is one of the Americas, yes. So there were people from Nicaragua, there were people from Guatemala, there were people from—that were here in the Bay Area. And we'd go dancing together, and that was another way that we told people of Mujerio and brought them in and gathering at the dances. Isolation kills, it kills, so that was the big medicine. And we had meetings in San Francisco and then we'd have food, and we danced, and we'd meet new people, and we'd hear people's stories. People would tell us stories, and we'd tell our stories about what was going on and asking about what did our community need and all of this.

So I'm looking at Naomi [*phonetic*], and Naomi worked that huge lesbian legal organization in San Francisco. I can't remember what it's called now, but she was involved there. So she had her hand on the pulse of getting legal resources for us who needed them, I mean she is so supportive. And I'm remembering the other people there.

And at that time, my partner was white, Hannah who I was living with, and she helped me so much to organize those big tamale meals. Because we had a really big, beautiful house on the

east side of Oakland and the east side of—no—oh, the east side of Oakland and was such an incredible accomplice and ally. And I'm remembering you, Hannah, as I do every day, and thank you so much and—for being one of the loves of my life and one of the most important people in my life and continue. We continue to work together, her in the ancestral world and me here. So I want to say that.

As we do, the incest started in Mujerio where we started sleeping with each other, and I call it incest just because—and I'm being thoughtful about using that term. But we were doing political work together, some of us were—all—oh, most of us were couples, so that made it more incestuous too because we were crossing lines that we had promised not to cross. And so it started to deteriorate and before it completely fell, visionaries like Naomi and other people said, "Ellas en Acción, a new group, let's start fresh, let's start fresh." And that had more of a base in San Francisco, and Mujerio felt to me like we had more of a base in Oakland, so.

Q: When did that start, when did Ellas en Acción start, around when?

Arellano: Oh, my God, I wish I could tell you. Let's see. Where was I? I was in—

Q: Is it the late '80s or—?

Arellano: I was early in sobriety. I got over to there at '80—oh, '81. I was successful being sober in '82, so '83, '84, '85, I'm sorry, I can't remember—

Q: It's all good.

Arellano:—you know.?

Q: But it's sort of as one organization started to, kind of, shift and another rose up—?

Arellano: Yes, Ellas en Acción, and more fierce organizing and strategizing for political action and stuff like that, and more about business. You know where Mujerio was really the formation of getting to know each other and nurturing each other and socializing, and Ellas was very nurturing and very great socializing and everything. But there was more fierceness, and there was more fierce activists came too and—yes.

Q: Yes. How did you see lesbian or queer communities in that time grapple with questions of inclusion over the years whether inclusion around race or around trans [transgender] identities or different gender identities?

Arellano: In those years, like the early '80s, the mid-'80s, and everything, people were not talking about trans stuff. Trans people already existed, they've existed for millenniums, but we weren't talking about it. The most evidence I was aware of and saw, it was in the gay men's community, okay? I didn't meet a trans man then—trans men then, I hadn't met any. But inclusion and stuff, it was like we had all already been harmed for many years by racism and white supremacy, so we were creating worlds for ourselves. So there was no invitation for the

white women to come; we had had it. And I'm speaking for myself because other people weren't at that posture, but I was, and I needed a break because I was just coming from Tucson, and so.

But in terms of inclusion, we welcomed couples, we welcomed singles, we welcomed—there was everybody from every class background you can remember—that's what I love about queerness is that we mix, we mix people, we mix! Because I have made friendships with people I didn't think I would ever meet or see that just had a very different life than me and had wealth and had protection and had three husbands in the past and had all of these things. And there were bisexual women, and we didn't talk about bisexual women, but I knew they were there, and I don't think bisexual women were really coming out freely because there was still a real—and there still is a lot of stigma, I carry some of that myself, about bisexual women, I still. I'm aware of it, and working to heal it, but it's very rooted in some of us, and I've had bisexual women as lovers and stuff, and it did present more problems for us and for me.

But anyway, so the inclusion, I'm trying to think. When we partied with men, the Latinx men, when we partied with them, there was a bar called Esta Noche. You know about it, right? It's closed now, so. That was where I first saw more trans folks than I had before because it was—it's basically was—who was really in spiritual charge of that bar was Latinx, gay, trans women. That was—yes.

Q: And what was it like for you personally to see those Latinx trans women in Esta Noche? Do you have any memories of what that was like for you or anything that it opened up within you?

Arellano: Well, I already identified with drag queens a lot because I had had friendships with drag queens here in Tucson. They protected me and took me under their wing, and that's where I learned that it was okay, if I ever wanted to be a drag queen, I could because they—I said, "Will I be like really appropriating and stuff?" They says, "We're giving you permission" because they say, "Why did you want to do it?" and I said, "Because I want to educate people about gender." It's a big leap for me for me to dress up with full makeup and a wig and everything like that, so I'm healing myself from my own transphobia and my drag queen phobia and everything.

I loved Esta Noche but I hardly—I can count on two fingers how many times I went there because I wanted to be with the women more than—and needed to be with the women and needed to be in that space and always had plans to return and spend more time there at that bar. But also, you got to remember, I was in early recovery, and I was still getting triggered by seeing people get drunk, especially our people. So that was another thing, and there was more consciousness around alcoholism in women's—in the lesbian community. And I just want to say that I noticed that in '82, '83, '84, '85, I started—there was a wave of lesbians getting sober, a wave of us. I mean there were so many of us getting sober, and it was almost—it was like a sacred tsunami. That the tsunami just came and got us and took us to the healing, to the healing of getting sober. And I was like whoa, I came right out at the right time here, I mean to the Bay Area, so—

There was more alcohol use and drug use in the gay and lesbian community because of the oppression [*phonetic*], you know, and so. I didn't see any of that trend in the men's community. I still don't know if one—if it even happened or existed. Because a lot of the gay men that I know

are still drinking, and I don't know if they have a promise, it's none of my business, but the alcohol is still so present. And the women's spaces, there's more women's spaces in the Bay Area now where they're sober spaces. Yes.

Q: Yes. You have been a richly expressive artist in so many different spaces and context as a poet, as a performer, a performance artist, many other things. Can you talk about your journey into your self-expression as a poet, as La Chola Priest, like how all of that arose?

Arellano: Yes, well first of all, I just want to say again that I came from a family of creativity. So that was encouraged and that was made space for. I always knew I had creative gifts; I mean I was doing Elvis Pressley impersonations when I was in first grade. And my parents would ask me when company would come over to do them, and sometimes, I'd do them, and that was part of my gender, and I'd comb my hair like that and everything, and so. And I really loved making things and I loved art and like that, and me and my brother, my brother carved drumsticks out of wood, and we would play with the drumsticks he carved. And I got to be a drummer in junior high, which they said, "This has never been done before." Yes, right.

So anyways, all of that always had some expression, and I was a dancer. I mean, oh, if you can dance, it keeps the creativity flowing, it keeps it open, that's my experience. And I love dancing, and I was good at it, and I'm still good at it by the way. It's been such a profound main medicine, and I want to thank my parents for always making space for that in our family. And we danced a lot together in our home, at parties in our home, in parties in other people's home, and they used to take us to dances. Where a lot of people didn't want to bring their kids, they used to take us to

the tea dances at [*foreign language*] at three o'clock some of the time, and so. I'm just very turned on by creativity, and I'm very turned on by performance and learning through the arts, and so.

And as a child, my dad played the harmonica, and I learned to play the harmonica. There's guitar in our culture everywhere, so I learned to play the guitar. I had some lessons and some teachers but mostly self-taught, most everything is self-taught. I promised myself that I was going to stalk Cherríe Moraga when I got to the Bay Area because I wanted to, and Gloria [Evangelina] Anzaldúa even though Gloria Anzaldúa was less available because she's spending part of her time in Santa Cruz [*phonetic*] in here.

But anyways, because I wanted to study writing under Cherríe Moraga, so I did, I did have to stalk her actually, not in ways that were oppressive, but she'd laugh, and she'd say, "Boy, you don't let up, " I go, "No, I won't." So I'd go to women's lesbian things and everything, and sometimes Cherríe would be there, and I'd go up to her, I said, "Do you—?" Because she had started a group called Indigena as Scribe [*phonetic*], and it was a group of women who were already writers and women who wanted to be better writers and were—you know? And it was all indigenous women, and we were from different countries. There was a woman there from Hawaii, and there was a woman—we were from different places, and it was all indigenous women, and oh my God, and Cherríe was the teacher, ai, yai, yai, ihole [*phonetic*].

And so she finally told me at one event I went to she was at, before I even approached her, she went, "Hey!" and she says, "guess what, I have a space for you in Indigena as Scribe." Oh I

got—and you know what, everyone wanted to be in that group that could qualify to be in that group as our demography and—wow. How many years was I? I know it was two plus years. Forgive me if I'm making mistakes. I'm talking to my listeners if—who listens to my oral history. I'm doing the best I can with—it's true that the memory changes as you get older, but it's not because we're demented. It's because we have collected in our random-access memory, the computer is full, where there's a lot of fullness. And sometimes to collect more information, I have let go of certain information I don't need to remember like dates and—to make more room for others stuff because this is an archives and a library right here, and I'm pointing to my brain.

Q: Yes.

Arellano: I have to have a bio break again.

Q: Yes.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So as we're talking about these beautiful encounters and writing spaces that you experienced with Cherríe Moraga, you also had encounters with Gloria Anzaldúa, Angela [Yvonne] Davis, and Audre Lorde.

Arellano: Yes.

Q: Could you talk about some of these encounters in community with lesbians of color in those times?

Arellano: Yes. Well, there was a bookstore in Oakland called Mama Bears, and it was a beautiful community center, and it was ran by elder, white lesbians, and they were phenomenal sharing that space. It was a beautiful bookstore, and we did performance there, we did gatherings there, and they were just incredible leadership there. One of the times Audrey Lorde came to visit because I was in the Bay Area forty-two years, so I think she came several times where I was aware of when I was living there. So one of the times she came, we had a party for her at Mama Bears. It was sweet, it was so sweet, and she came and talked and asked us questions, and we talked, and we had food, and then it was time to dance, we had music and everything, and so.

I love Audre Lorde and her work and everything, and so I was just in awe. So I was like with my eyes real big just watching, and she flirted with me, and she made her way across the room to come and flirt with me, and she flirted with me. And she put her arm around me, and she flirted with me and flirted with me, and I was more in awe, and I was like, oh, whoa, I was like—because I'm a highly sensitive person. I went into over sensory, so I couldn't really—and it wasn't like she was trying to pick me up, I didn't get any of that. I got it that she was really expressing her sensuality.

And I just want to say something about Audre Lorde that I thought about yesterday that's very important. You know Pat Parker's work, right? Pat Parker, one of the most radical poets ever in this life. Pat Parker, an African American lesbian that was an incredible writer and was one of

the biggest truth tellers I ever heard. And I used to go watch her, and I loved her and identified with her in some ways. So I want to say that Audre Lorde was not going to come out, she had too much status in academia, and she just was not going to come out, okay. Well, Pat Parker and her stayed up one night, and Pat Parker had planned this to talk to her about coming out. They stayed up one night talking all night long, the next day, Audrey was ready to come out. So I want to thank Pat Parker, okay, delivering Audre Lorde to us that way. Thank you, Pat Parker, my ancestor, I love you. And I got to perform—see her perform and then she transitioned, and I think alcohol was a big part of that. And I just need to say that because I don't want to lose us to that, so anyway. So there was Audre Lorde thing.

And then Oakland was like a hotspot for lesbians, like I said, more lesbians per capita in the world. So anyways, there was a group, I don't remember the name of the group, but it was organized by women of color, they weren't in Mujerio or Ellas, and it was organized by African American women of color. I think the *Aché* women. The *Aché* was the Black lesbian journal that—the art journal and literature, and it was just incredible. I really was close to the women in that community and that happening. Well they—I'm pretty sure it was them—they used to have a part in San Joaquin Park [*phonetic*], is I think it is in the East Bay hills. In the summer, we used to have a picnic once a month for—I don't know how many years it went on, but it went on for a while.

And that's where I met Angela Davis, and there we were just—because she also is an important shero to me. And so there we were just socializing, sharing food, hanging out, dancing in the grass, all of us, all of us without those class boundaries and stuff like that, you know. And I was

thrilled, I was thrilled and then I got to see her enough that I felt like she recognized me. I don't know if she did, but this went on years where I'd see her, I'd go, "Hello, Angela, how are you?" And she'd always be gracious and say hi and everything and then go on her way. And then sometimes I'd be on Lakeshore [California], and I'd see her writing in one of the cafés and stuff like that. It was thrilling, it was really thrilling because not only was she this Black lesbian, but she was Panthers [Black Panther Party]. And one of the reasons Oakland came to my attention earlier on was because the Panthers were here. And if the Panthers were here, I could feel safer, and I sure did because they were active when I got here. They were still walking around, doing patrol and stuff and keeping us safe, very grateful.

And Gloria Anzaldúa, oh my God, Gloria Anzaldúa. Gloria Anzaldúa is one of the most powerful medicine people I've ever met in my life, and I organized. There was a building in Oakland that there was a place for rent, so I went to see about the place for rent and met the landlord. It was an African American man, and he had cleaned out the building because there had been problems and so there was a bunch of apartments available. So I asked him would he consider letting us have it as lesbians, and he said, "Who would manage it?" and I said, "I don't know." He said, "What about you?" and I said, "I would do that." So it became a lesbian building, and I made sure there was a balance because all these white women pounding on the door to get in, and I go, "No, there's enough of you here now, no more," and I got in trouble for that. I got in trouble for different things, but that's okay.

So Gloria Anzaldúa heard about the lesbian building and wanted to come and live there, and so she came to live there. So she was on the other side of my wall, my neighbor. Oh, my God, it

was so incredible, and I got to visit her, and she stayed up at night, all night sometimes, that's when she worked, I know now why. I used to go visit her, and I was just so—but it was beautiful and wonderful, and I learned a lot. And I want to point out that she was a graphic artist, and she—when she would do all her teachings and trainings and everything, she would actually illustrate it and graphic recording, it's called a graphic recorder. And I was just blown away by that because her images were images I could really relate to from my culture that I hadn't seen in this lifetime but live in my DNA [deoxyribonucleic acid]. I recognize them and that she remembered. She helped me remember that we're carrying multiple generations in us, so, and, yes, it was beautiful to have her there as a neighbor.

Q: Oh, yes.

Arellano: She had writing workshops, they're all women of color, and in her apartment right next door to me, all this was going on, yes.

Q: Can you tell us about your persona and performance work as La Chola Priest?

Arellano: Yes, and I want to give a little framework for it first, is that I was in the Re-evaluation Co-Counseling [Counseling] hard and heavy for ten years. I was being groomed for leadership, so I was already assisting, teaching, and stuff. And my partner at that time was, Cathy Cade who is a famous lesbian photographer, a white woman, and she was at every lesbian thing, oh, she had a body of work—and she's still alive. She's I think—God, Cathy's what—Cathy's got to be near ninety, yes. We were lovers, and I was with her while we were both in Co-Counseling, and

we were living together when Chola Priest was born, and I got so much beautiful—the picture she took on the front of Chola Priest's chapbook is a picture that that she took, and the person who fixed the picture did the magical digital art on it was Alma [Lopez]—what's Alma's name? Well anyways, it's in the chapbook there. She is also a very famous Chicana artist.

So anyways, let me just go back to that we just go back to Chola Priest. So I was doing Re-evaluation Co-Counseling, and all of my creativity was just starting to gush forward because when you do Re-evaluation Co-Counseling on a regular basis weekly, you're having sessions of discharging. The whole premise was—it's in like seventy countries now—but it's to get people in shape to lead social justice activism. And the first thing on the agenda of what we're getting done is ending, ending racism against African Black folks, okay. Because I learned, and I believe it, that the racism against Black folks is the main pillar holding up all the other oppressions. And when we destroy that pillar, all the other pillars would crumble, and I totally can still see how that works in, and yes, it's true, so.

I got a lot of help in Co-Counseling, I did so much healing in Co-Counseling, and I had mentorship. Maria Franco [*phonetic*] was one of my—she's a heterosexual woman, Chicana—one of my mentors. And I had said I never had a mentor, but I did have her mentorship, and I did have other people's mentorship in Co-Counseling. I was there ten years, and I had people watch after me and watch over me in anything.

And I ended up leaving because they didn't—because they were kicking trans people out of the—oh, yes, they were kicking trans people, and they were asking me, "You need to wear a

dress," so I could heal my masculinity, things like that. And I said, "When [Carl] Harvey [Jackins]—" He was the founder, he was in his eighties, he was such a yucky heterosexual man, in some ways, around his heterosexuality. I said, "When Harvey puts on a dress, I'll put on a dress," so take that message. So anyways, I never put on a dress for them, but anyways, they don't know I was a drag queen later. So I just want to give thanks here and appreciations there to all those people holding me, including Cathy Cade, including my mentorship in Co-Counseling, and all the places that I performed Chola Priest.

So in Co-Counseling, I did focus work on Catholic liberation, which means we want to heal the damage that Catholicism has done to us. And Joanne [Bray] was the International [Liberation Reference Person for Catholics] leader of Catholic Liberation, and she and I really connected well. So she made sure that I got access to the Co-Counseling [International] Catholic Liberation Workshops, and my mentors did too, around healing Catholicism, the damage from Catholicism. So I got to know her pretty good, and she was supporting my leadership too.

So anyways, I did a lot of healing there, and then all of a sudden, Chola Priest showed up. Chola Priest just showed up just all of a sudden. I had this vision of dressing in Catholic priest drag to help others heal what I had been given in Co-Counseling around healing my damage from Catholicism and to—like I said, we pay it forward, we share it, and, of course, I had a lot of support for that. So I ordered my clothes from the Catholic in Utah. In Utah, no less, you can buy your dresses of the Catholic priest, you can buy. I ordered hosts, they said, "Do you want the ones with the sheep on them or the ones with the crosses?" I said, "Give me the ones with the sheep," thinking like we're all sheep, but anyways, and I did that. I practiced at home first of

wearing the whole drag because it was intense to put it in on and everything, and I really liked it. Oh, I liked it so much, so—

Q: How did it feel? What was it like in your body—?

Arellano: It was euphoric, it was euphoric. It was almost like I was a priest at some time in some life, and I was revisiting something I already had inside of me, and I knew—and because I loved, because I had my great-grandmother who was a full-blooded Rarámuri woman who was both invested in some Catholicism and invested in indigenous medicine. I was more open to that because she used to clean the church in Silver City, New Mexico, where I was born, and she had some things in her bedroom that were given to her from the church and the priests that were really like fancy altar stuff and all that. So that was in me. I did go to Catholic catechism because I didn't care where God was, I just wanted to go there. So I knew a lot of catholic stuff, and I really studied the priest. I was more interested in them than I was interested in the nuns, and I would study the priest and everything, and I really wanted one of those little collars, and I really—I imagined wearing a collar secretly, but I never did.

But anyways back to Oakland, I had all of the support, so I—where was the first place I performed? I can't remember, but of course, there was different performance things happening and Oakland happening and San Francisco. The venues were already available, and people would say—and I tell them what I was—I'd pitch it, and they go, "Oh, yes, how soon can you come, how soon can you—?" I said, "I do this, I do a sermon." I said, "It's the performance artist, an actual sermon and I lift everybody, and I tell them the truth about themselves. I mention

the lies that Catholicism has told about us as queers and as women and all of this. And I'll tell them things about the Vatican, they don't know they need to know about. It's the most powerful entity in the world period," things like that. And so I started performing and people loved the performance.

And so I'd give the service and then I'd serve Necco Wafers, which are these little, round candy wafers, as communion. I'd say, "God is completely pleased with everything you are, <u>everything you are</u>." And when I did the sermons and especially when I went to Washington, DC [District of Columbia], Yego [*phonetic*], which was a national Latinx political organization, hired me to fly to Washington and do sermon with them because they had heard about me, and it was the same time as the women's march on Washington, so I got to march in that.

And so I went, and I did performance, and we were in a really beautiful hotel. When I was on the elevator going to do my sermon, people were addressing me as father, "Good evening, Father, good evening, Father," and I would just give them a benevolent nod. I didn't say anything because I wanted to be in character because my voice is what it is. And when I'd get off the elevator, I'd say something in my most femmest voice that I have, too. I mean I go, "You-all have a good evening, okay?" just like that, just—and they would—they—some of them knew they had been had and then I'd go to my—where I was going to do performance and stuff, but I'd do something to shock them when I was getting off the elevator. I know it was much better than what I just did because I was so in character.

Q: And what was it like for you to pass as a priest and also what was it like for you to pass as male in those moments, as a cis male?

Arellano: I loved it, I loved it, I loved it. It was euphoric, and a lot of trans people talk about when we—when we're experiencing our true self, this euphoria comes, and I believe it's sacred. I really do believe it's a gift, and it's sacred, and I was euphoric. I mean I just was so into it, and I loved it, I loved it. There's a power that comes with it, a hidden power that we carry as two-spirit people, as people on the trans spectrum, which I'll talk a little bit more about later but—

And what was interesting was the majority of the people attending the Yego conference were gay men and trans women. Lots of trans women were at that. And people really loved my sermon and everything, and they were the ones that were having catharsis right there during the communion serving when I was saying to them how pleased God is with everything you are and everything, and I'm apologizing. I'm apologizing for all the lies that Catholicism has told about you, things like that and everything. And people were bursting out crying and having a breakthrough right there. I loved that because that's my work, and I loved being in Washington, DC, to do this work and the women's march and everything, and I loved being a priest.

And even some of the people wanted to meet privately with me in my room after my sermon because they said, "I really need your help," and I go, "You know what, you think you need my help. We just did together so much healing of yours, I want you to experience it without thinking that you need more priestly support. There's nothing wrong with you. If there was something

wrong with you, I'd be happy to hold confession in my room afterwards. That's not true. It's not true, it's lies, it's not true. And you deserve your own compassion," things like that and—

Q: And looking back now, what do you think that doing this incredible artistic work and healing work as La Chola Priest—clearly, it gave so much to others, what do you think that it gave you on your own journey of healing and gender healing?

Arellano: Well, I really believe that healing is reciprocal, so any kind of healing work I'm doing with people, the healing is—like one of my teacher says, "Oh, it's rubbing off on you all over the place." That when we're giving medicine, we're getting medicine, and I felt it really helped me heal more of the Catholicism experience that I had. And it really helped me really be bold and have permission because then I promoted myself to pope. So now I have a pope dress in my closet and a pope hat. So I came out later in Oakland as the pope. I'm the pope now, did you hear, I got promoted and all this, and I'm charge.

And then we were going to a big dyke party in the Mission [District, California] one night. This woman used to throw a beautiful—Michelle [*phonetic*] used to throw these beautiful Halloween parties, so I went on BART [San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District] with my homies, and I was just in full pope drag walking in the Mission. The expressions that I got, and some of the stuff people said like, "Is that a pope? Is that—? [*Laughs*] And people aren't supposed to dress up for Halloween as popes," I heard people saying. Nobody attacked me or anything like that but—

Q: And the Mission is a very Latino neighborhood.

Arellano: It's completely Latino, it's completely so that stuff was being said to me in Spanish too. Thank you for helping me remember to say that. And it was quite a walk through the Mission, and we were planning on walking through the Mission just because we love the Mission, and sure enough, it really had an impact. And I also wore the pope—

I had an adopted Mexicana grandmother who was ancient, she was in her nineties, and I used to go visit her at the senior center in the Fruitvale in Oakland, right? And so for Halloween, I wore the pope stuff, oh, she loved it, she loved it! She loved it when I dressed really masculine. She goes, *"¡Ay, así te quiero más!"* When I dress really masculine, she would tell me that, and she when she saw me the pope, she was—she says she loved it, she loved it. There were elders in there that were complaining about it. I already had a plan, and I knew that was going to happen. And she says, *"¡no te lo quites!"* because the people were saying, "You shouldn't be wearing those," you know, and all of these people are speaking to me in Spanish. And I'd say, "I really hear you, and I'm going to honor what you're requesting, give me a few more minutes" because my grandmother was saying, "no, no te lo quites" and everything. [*Laughs*] And when I was really in a suit, a man's suit with a tie and everything, "Así te quiero más, I love you more that way." Do you see, do you see and this was—

We found each other, we found each other this grandmother and me because I was looking. A friend of mine says, "You can have, you can adopt a grandmother." So she was at an event that I was working where we were feeding the seniors, and I was—I had a program to bring the

African American seniors and the Latinx seniors together in Oakland, and I got paid really good to do that, and I had that privilege of doing that. And I met her at one of the events when I had worked separately with the African American elders and then I worked separately with the Latinx elders. And then we came to celebrate together because I told the African Americans, "Our migratory—our migration is very similar to yours," and a lot of them didn't know how they migrated in the United States to stay safe and have work. And so that was something that warmed their hearts.

Q: Yes.

Arellano: So anyways, I got to do that work, which was wonderful, and I had this grandmother until she transitioned. So I went, I said, "Okay, *Abuelita*, I'm going to honor them, they need me to take this off. And you know what, I really want to honor them because I want to be able to come here and have peacefulness with you." And I used to go weekly sometimes, and she said, "*Yo entiendo* [I understand]" So I went and I took it off, and I came back, and I had it in a bag, and I looked at the woman that had specifically asked me, and I put my hands together and I bowed to her, and she went. So I had honored her and—

Q: Oh, thank you so much for these stories about La Chola Priest and the pope and all the voices [*phonetic*]—

Arellano: Chola pope, I had them, yes.

Q: Yes, it's so rich, and this is going to mean so much to so many people who'll listen in the future.

Arellano: and I still have the Chola pope outfit, just so you know.

Q: Oh, amazing. And then you also have had a persona who is an indigenous Latinx drag queen, Carlitos.

Arellano: Yes.

Q: Can you tell us about Carlitos and also maybe how Carlitos is connected to the masculinity within you?

Arellano: Okay. First, I want to honor one of my lovers, this is one of the loves of my life, Arlene Diehl [*phonetic*] who is a phenomenal artist who did naked portraits of me. The bodies of her work in the last, I think, thirty years of her work is—she works in charcoal and does nudes and has a studio where she goes every week to with models and incredible artist, and one of the best relationships I've ever had. We had so much fun, we laughed so much, we were so playful with each other. We could play anywhere, anytime on the drop of a dime. I mean we had such a good time, and I was in Co-Counseling then, so I was getting a lot—weekly, a lot of discharge around the relationship, one of the most peaceful, beautiful relationships I ever had. So I'm honoring you, Arlene, in this, and I'm going to tell you about it in case you want to listen to it.

So anyways, we were at kin folks. We were at a birthday party of hers, and I had never met Carlitos then. I knew I had this thing about drag queens and everything, I had never met him, but all of a sudden, Arlene's there, she's got this dramatic scarf on. And all of a sudden, this persona came out, which is Carlitos, and grabbed her scarf and said, "That's mine," and put it on, and I just went into the full character of Chola—of Carlitos. And Arlene was thrilled, and she's squealing with happiness whenever she—we'd squeal a lot because we delighted so much in each other and playing, dancing. She's one of my best dance partners; oh my God, we were incredible as dancers together. And she said, "Oh how gay!" You know, I mean, she recognized it right away, the grabbing, stealing the scarf, and putting it on, and all of that, and everything. "Oh, I—who is that, who is that, who is that?" and I said, "Oh, Carlitos!" And the name came out, the name came out. And she just was in love with Carlitos, in love with Carlitos. So I had all of the musing I needed.

So I went on to develop the character, and I had had that character in the past when I was with Cathy Cade, and she photographed and everything, and I'm remembering, thank you for this, and Carlitos, kind of went to sleep and was absent for a while. Chola Priest was living on and everything, but Carlitos was in the background, and in it took the musing from Arlene and whatever else I had done to prepare to bring—wait, I'm sorry, I'm confusing it. Chola Priest was alive when I was with Cathy, Carlitos wasn't. Forgive me, I have a little THC [tetrahydrocannabinol] in my brain. Carlitos fully was born while I was in the relationship with Arlene, that's my correction, and she just fed it. Because anything we wanted to do—she had characters that I fed, she was a *bruja* [witch], a green *bruja*, and I just—we played so beautifully that way.

So Carlitos was born, and of course, I went to one of the performance venues that I used to like to perform at. Linda [*phonetic*] is her first name, an elder—I can't remember her last name—a white woman. It's at one of the churches, we had a space over there some of the time, it's called the church of jazz or something, but it was a Christian church, and it was very progressive one, so we performed there. And I pitched it to her, and she said, "When can you be here?" right away and performed there several times. And even did [Isabel] Chavela Vargas [Lizano] performance there, that I took on Chavela Vargas's persona, and they loved it. Everyone loved it, everyone loved it, everyone loved it.

And like I said, I went to the Salvation Army downtown Oakland because they had a boutique, and I bought this fifteen-pound dress that was sequined and the matching—and high heels and a purse and everything right there at the boutique, I found everything. I knew where to go, I went there, I found my whole outfit, except the wig, I ordered the wig online. And I tried to get a Tina Turner wig because I love that hairdo, and I got it red. I loved my drag clothes, and they hung in my closet for a long time. I didn't bring them with me, I had to get rid of a lot of stuff, but anyways, that kind of stuff. Because there's part of me that still wants to do that stuff. I don't know if I have the energy, so I'll know what I have. After I heal from the summer and from COVID [coronavirus disease] isolation and everything, I'll be able to do more, I [*phonetic*] know, than I'm doing now, and I'm going to take back some of my things.

I want to tell this. So anyways, a dear friend of mine, a Mexicana, a lesbian Mexicana used to have parties for us. She had a beautiful house, and she used to have parties. And one year, we

had a Halloween party at her house, and I was with Arlene, and I came as Chola Priest. And when I walked up on the back porch to go on to the back way, there were some white lesbians sitting out there, and one of them Judy [*phonetic*] said to me, "Is—" because I was going by Lea, "Lea, is that you?" I said, "Yes," and she goes, "Oh no, that's wrong," and really looked disgusted, really looked disgusted. I didn't say anything. We were just anxious to get inside to be with people, and so we were inside. And later on, Arlene and I were standing, having some food or something, and she came up, and she said to Arlene, "How can you let her do that?" And Arlene said, "Are you are you kidding? I am more crazy about her when she's in drag than I am when she's not." I says, "I can resist her less," I said, "It's such a thrill for me." I mean Arlene knew what it was for her. And I said, "Judy, if this is disturbing you, there's something you haven't dealt with, it's not about me," and she said, "Whatever," and walked away, a white lesbian who was entitled and privileged.

Q: And I'm thinking about all of these layers of masculinity and different gender expressions and gender queerings [*phonetic*] and how you worked with that and played with that in community. One of the things that you did, at one point, is teach workshops at the BUTCH Voices Conference?

Arellano: Yes.

Q: You taught a workshop about misogyny at the BUTCH Voices Conference.

Arellano: Yes.

Q: Could you talk about what that was like and what you learned or witnessed about butch culture and misogyny in those spaces?

Arellano: So first of all, I made sure that I wrote a really good invitation for the program, so people would come, and I did, and they came. There was a good number of butches of color, which I really loved, I talked about that in the invitation too and—I need a bio break, I'm sorry. I'm going to try not to—

[INTERRUPTION]

Arellano: Okay, so let me do a little recap here for you and for myself is that I'm at BUTCH Voice's Conference, so I'm going to do a workshop for masculine of center, for studs, and for butches on dismantling misogyny. And I didn't use the word misogyny because it scares some people because it's as aggressive and fierce as it needs to be. I just said, let's learn together how to honor the femme and the divine feminine and all that, and so they came. So I want to say that I was at this BUTCH conference with—and it was in Oakland, and it would come to Oakland, I love that—with my sweetheart then who was Arlene Diehl who I talked about a little while ago.

But I also want to say that Arlene did these nude portraits of me, and they were just so gorgeous that—and because I've had enough healing, I decided to—we decided to show them at the BUTCH Voices Conference because there were people that brought art. And there was a whole auditorium where there was art on display, and it was great, so I brought those.

So before my workshop, people had gotten wind of it, and butches had come to talk to me about those nudes, and some of them would say, "How can you do that?" and they grimace, and they make this face like how can you do that? And I don't think it was about me or what I looked like nude. I think it was about them, that it was that they—it was something they would never do. I'd say it took a lot of work. I had to really, really come back to my body in whatever size, shape it is, was, and I said—because I have been large and I have been—and I've been not large. I've been thin and experienced the world as a thin person, and I don't mean slim. I was thin at one place because I was—that's another story. But anyways, I said so I think it's really important and so they were just—they were mind-blowing and everything, and some people really loved it because the nudes are so beautiful.

So anyways, the workshop, so people show up. I'm really pleased with how many people showed up, and it's a mix of people. It's mostly people of color, which I'm delighted, and it's less work for me because when white people come, I just have to say there—there was a white person that showed up that tried to take over the workshop, so I'm just saying, it's more work for me. That's why I'm saying it, and they finally quieted down and went away because I wouldn't let them. They wanted to talk about their gig and their—I said, "We're not here to do that," but anyways.

So there was people in the room that called themselves studs, and I'm not a stud, and I don't know what a stud is because everybody gets to define their own gender. And people were saying that—were identifying as stud, they were saying it was their gender, and masculine of center, and

all that and so I just talked about—I asked a lot of questions and let them tell little stories about their experiences. One of the stories, I think one of the early ones was like, "Have you ever—?" I said, "I'm going to start with questions and it's going to be very interactive." I said, "Have you ever walked into a woman's restroom, and the women in there respond or react to you? Is anyone willing to tell us what that was like?" Sure enough, the first person that said, "Hell, yes, and it pisses me off. I walk into a woman's restroom, and they started telling me to get out and stuff like that," and they said their piece and then I said, "May I ask you a question?" They said, "Yes."

I said, "Why wouldn't they react that way? Because men are dangerous and they perceived you as a man. That's how beautiful you celebrate your masculinity, that's how believable." Instead of making them feel bad because I wanted to scold them. I said, "They saw you for what some of us want to be seen as, as masculine, and as queer, female-bodied women, how many of us, show of hands, how many of us have a commitment to protect women and girls because that's been most of my political work?" And people raised their hands. The younger ones no, but the older ones, there was a bunch raising—I said, "This is at the heart [*claps hands*] of winning safety for you. And how many of you can now go down the street holding hands with your girlfriend and not be afraid that you're going to get killed?" And there's people that raised their hands. I said, "We worked for you to have that safety, and I'm going to ask you to reconsider if you haven't made the safety of women a priority, that you do so. And when you walk into a woman's room, expect this and be as gracious, as generous as you can or else change your outfits and change your appearance." They go, "Oh hell no, hell no, hell no."

I said, “Because I have been—I said, “A woman much smaller than me felt safe enough that she pushed me out of the restroom. Even when I said to her, ‘I’m safe, I belong here,” and she heard my voice, she’s still needing me to go, and I went, and I didn’t get mad at her. She was protecting the women that were in the restroom. That’s something I would usually be willing to do.” I mean just giving them scenarios like that and helping them tell their stories, and I said, “Why—?”

And questions like, “How many of you get your culture of masculinity from watching men and then acting it out?” “Oh, hell no, we don’t do that, yes.” And then I start saying about how they treated women. We just started breaking it down in terms of the terms of the patriarchal gender modeling that we all have, and they started getting it. That, “Oh hell, I’m going to check my woman,” language like that, “Yes, I have to check her, I have to check her sometimes, and it was from all colors, the Brown ones, White ones, the Black ones talking about—

And I said, “We need to talk about control of women,” and then I talk about the origins of it, and I talk about the horrors of it, and people were really getting it. And those that didn’t, it was okay because it was a minority. They were getting angry, and that was okay, that’s part of the healing, that’s part of the healing. And I asked again, I said, “If it anything I gave you was a value, I’m going to ask you please to consider being as generous and kind and not fighting with women when you walk into the women’s restroom. Can you please think about that and do that for me? Because some of those things you enjoy them public, I bled for them in the street,” and I talked a little bit about getting hit in the head and all of these things and everything. I said, “I’m an OG [*phonetic*], you know, and the things that you think fell out of the sky, they didn’t fall out of the

sky. We paid with them with our bodies on the lines like that." And we talked about appreciating each other the way that we are also.

Q: And, ah, thank you so much for that. What have you learned from that kind of community work or in general, about the connections between affirming masculine women and folks on the trans masculine spectrum and dismantling patriarchy?

Arellano: What have I learned about it?

Q: About that connection, about how affirming folks who are masculine of center or on the trans masculine spectrum connects to dismantling patriarchy?

Arellano: Well, first, I want to say that I definitely consider myself to be on the trans spectrum. I don't go in community and have conversations when I could actually benefit from them if I identified as a full transgender person. I identify more as a two-spirited person, and I'm very happy to be a transgender person, and I'm moving closer and closer to being more out about that.

I lost friendships in the lesbian community in the Bay Area because of my position. There are a lot of lesbian TERFs [trans-exclusionary radical feminist], let me just say that, and there was more before, there's less now, but there's still a bunch. But I have publicly taken the platform that you are my community, all of the women that identify as lesbian, as dykes, as gay, you are—you're my family and my community. And I said, "Every transgender person is my family and community" because when I was born, I was made to cross-dress, which really harmed me,

really harmed me. Those tight, little patent leather shoes with those frilly socks and the dresses I hated that constricted my breathing, and I said, “It was physically a torture and emotionally and spiritually a torture for me because there was no room for me anywhere.”

And I talk about the two-spiritedness and the non-binary. I said, “And trans people who identify as trans people, and the courage that one has to have, they are one of the most endangered human species on the planet. As you know, if you if you know what’s going on politically, you know how many Black transwomen have been shot in the back, how many white trans people have been murdered, especially transwomen and some transmen and of all colors and—” anyways.

Q: Was there a point at which you stopped identifying as a lesbian and identifying as a member of the trans spectrum or do you hold both simultaneously?

Arellano: You know what I tell people because some people will say, “Well, what are you?” And I’ll say, “I’m a lesbian, I’m a dyke, I’m two-spirited, and I definitely belong on the trans spectrum.” I hold all of those things sacred and dear, and I love them, and whenever I need to shape-shift in an out of communities, I do it, and I do it well, and I do it respectfully. Unless somebody messes with me with racism or something, then the respect is out the window, anyways.

And calling women on TERF-ness, and even calling my cis heterosexual indigenous neighbor and saying, “When you’re hating on a trans person, you’re hating on me.” “Oh, no, you’re not like that.” “Oh, yes, I am like that,” things like that. Trans people have helped me do my deeper

work in my gender, my deeper work in my gender because if that non-binary-ness even had been an option, trans had been an option as a child, I wouldn't have grown up with as much trauma as I grew up with and how much work I had to do and have to do and continue to do—by the way, it's lifelong—of just when you pretend, you have to pretend you're something you're—that you're not. I said that is one of the deepest complex PTSDs that I know of, yes, and so.

I don't know if you heard about this, a couple years ago at the dyke march, there was—they got down, they fought physically and everything. And I took a public stance on that, and I sent out messages to both communities and wherever I could and wherever they—and I—

Q: This was a fight between anti-trans but—

Arellano: There was TERFs—

Q: —that this [*phonetic*]—

Arellano:—and transgender people, transwomen mostly because they were saying, "You're pretending to be women," whatever. There was a big fight, and there was a public conversation online about it and everything, and I joined that too, and I got to say, "Look, this is unacceptable, you're both in the shit house with me. All of you are in the shit house with me because you resorted to physical violence against each other, and that's exactly what they want us to do. They want us to kill each other, and you took us a step closer to that." And I said choice things about the—I called the trans people out publicly like that, and I called the TERFs out, and I called the

lesbians out because they're—some of them identify as TERFs probably, you know that, and some of them don't want that, so.

And I'm an elder, and I talked about my indigenous elderhood and that this is my job in my community because I actually made things like the dyke march possible. I was doing that work in the late '60s and in the '70s and in the—and they listened. And sometimes they listen, some of them are probably going—but I can't see them, and I just put my fingers in my ears and stick out my tongue. But I got to really talk about that, and I'm very grateful for that.

And still I've encountered here because I made a friendship here with a white lesbian that used to live in the Bay Area, and we've just talked on the phone because that's what I do first. I don't show up with people until I know them a little bit, you know. I felt some trans phobia from her and so I'm not sure that that's what it was, but I came away from the conversation with a red flag. And so the next time we have a conversation, I'm getting ready to ask her how she feels about transgendered people, and I'm going to come out to her as somebody who's on the trans spectrum and how I was tortured.

I was not tortured by the lesbian of the color when I lived here in and lesbians [*unclear*]. When I lived in Tucson as a lesbian, I was not tortured by the lesbians of color. I was tortured by the white lesbians who used to tell me, "You are emulating a man, you are behaving like a man," and there they are in their damn flannel shirts and their hiking boots and shit and everything. I go, "What?" From the racism and their entitlement, they were saying, "You make us uncomfortable" and it was also—it was a lot of racism because I'm very passionate. And I would

raise my voice at the meetings and everything because we were doing political justice and social justice work together and everything, and it was very racist and so anyways.

Oh, the PTSD of racism, like people—anyone that hears this that says, "Oh God, does she have to harp on racism?" I said, "I have to harp on it because it harped on me and it created the complex PTSD that I'm carrying to this day, and I wake up into it every day." And whatever you can do, do it, end racism, pay your reparations, end racism. This is for any white people that hear me, so.

And I have rheumatoid arthritis, and the reason I have rheumatoid arthritis is because that I've lived in this culture of white—of so-called white supremacy and racism. And there's a book, it calls When the—it's called *When the Body Says No: [The Cost of Hidden Stress]*. You don't believe me, that's okay, a white man wrote that book. Read that, what oppression has done to people of color, read that, Gabor Maté, Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No.* Read that because he's a white man and you'll believe him. So anyways, where was I, where are we going? Give me the map. Give me the GPS [Global Positioning System].

Q: [*Laughs*] We were talking about being in that space of the trans spectrum and holding that and also holding being a dyke and a lesbian and all of those things. And is there anything more you want to say on that?

Arellano: I just want to say that I would go to the trans. When I was still living in the Bay Area, I'd go to the trans, gay pride picnic and celebration at [Mission] Dolores Park for all the time I

was there that it was in existence. And I loved that celebration, and I was so embraced and held and even as an elder, I was more embraced and held in the trans community than I was in in the gay community, and I love that. People just embraced me, nobody ever made me feel like I didn't completely belong there, check that out, okay?

I did say to a dear transman who's part of my chosen family, I said, "I want my march, I want my parade" because there's a Dyke March, which I go to the Dyke March, dance my ass off, everything. And I go to the trans thing, and I go to the Gay Pride on the weekend. Those are all mine, all of them are mine.

I try to explain to people that don't—pretend to don't understand—they don't understand trans. If I say, "You know what, this is about your freedom. The non-binary people, they're the leaders of justice and freedom for us queer people. They are the leaders because they are refusing to step into one of those two choices of pink or blue. They are refusing, they are refusing to identify with—for the privilege it will gain them to—this is a—if we—if we're not in line to the cis heterosexist, white supremacist march, we are in danger. And non-binary people and trans people are at the leader—they're leading this struggle and this fight for freedom for all peoples around the prisons of gender and how you're treated [*phonetic*]. Even men's oppression, sexism for women, all—"I said, "Because men are so oppressed by this too, this binary—you know, that there's this binary and everything, and men don't even know it. And women super more oppressed, but so oppressed of having to get up and perform every day and get on stage every day in this character that is so restrictive and so much work and so expensive.

And that's my stand that I'm saying this, and I don't mean to alienate people that really believe that they love all the work they put into being the super feminine woman or the—what are the men called that chop down trees, lumberjacks—or being the lumberjack, and so anyways. Yes, and I am still on my journey, I'm still on my journey of becoming my full self. It's lifelong, I don't care how old you are, I don't care how much you've studied and worked, it's lifelong. Becoming ourselves is lifelong, and it's fluid, and there's so much possibility in that, you know, so, yes, thank you.

[END OF SESSION]

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Narrator: Tupili Lea Arellano | Location: Tucson, AZ

Interviewer: Caro De Robertis | Date: September 29th 2022

Q: Tupili, what strikes or surprises you most about this current period of your life?

Arellano: [*Laughs*] How I'm still a street fighter. [*Laughs*] I thought by now I'd be so mellowed out. Oh, no, no, I still want to get in the street and kick ass, I still want to kick ass about racism, I still want to—you know? I'm like a *peleonera*, and it's like, Oh, I'm ready, I'm down. That really surprises me because I really thought that I wouldn't be—have this much fire for that still.

Q: That person who burned down the house for justice?

Arellano: Yes, yes.

Q: And what do you wish younger generations of LGBTQ+ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus], people of color could know or see about your generation?

Arellano: That we are valuable living, walking, talking archives of how we won the privileges that younger generations are enjoying now, and it didn't fall out of the sky like some of you think because I've had conversations with younger people. And that we have so much life experience to share and that we want to—some of us want to be seen, and we want to be

respected and honored for what we've done and what we've given. And I want younger people to know also that a lot of what is held as mainstream belief is not true, and they have totally put us to sleep on different levels. We're basically like the walking comatose and in the way that they told us we have to work to survive.

When we're in our right minds, if you think about it, having to work to eat, right there, there's something very off about that. And my neighbor next door who's seventy years old, my dark brown, beautiful, indigenous neighbor, Lucy [*phonetic*] is only eating one meal a day because that's all she can afford, okay. Those harms have to be undone and I want young—I want people of color to know we're much more powerful than what we believe, I really want—is that our power—we've been talked out of our medicines and our powers. We've been talked out of them, and we're very obedient, and we're in slavery mode, and that all has to change. That all has to change, and please know your history and your herstories, please, of the things that we have done, and it's recorded, and there's so much available.

When I was a young teenager, I couldn't even find a book or a newspaper or a Plexus [Plexus LGBT & Allies Chamber of Commerce] or a—you know? There was nothing for us, nothing. And I mean there's stuff that was happening in New York with the leadership of the trans people. You know Stonewall [Riots]? That was in New York, but the rest of us who are dispersed all over the country and everything, some of us didn't have any access to that or to elders. You have a lot of access, use it and support the elders, support us. Don't make us worry about if we're going to be able to stay alive for another year because many of us are worried, and many of us

had been displaced. I was displaced in gentrified in Oakland, and please just know what's going, on with us and know that together, there's so much that we can do—that interconnectedness.

Q: Yes, thank you. If we think of stories as a kind of cultural inheritance and this offering into the archive of oral histories as an offering of cultural inheritance that you're bringing, what is it you would want younger and future generations of queer and trans folks to see or carry with them about your life?

Arellano: Hey, check them out, they got sober, and they reported to us recently on this oral history, they've been sober forty-one years! It's doable, it's doable. Alcoholism is our—is chains around our ankles and around our mind, and it's doable. We don't have to fall into the hands of so—well, this is it. We're suffering, and a lot of times doing drugs and doing alcohol is self-medication, and it's a way to survive, but in community and together, there's other ways to survive. We feed each other such profound medicines.

Q: Yes. Is there anything else that you would like to say?

Arellano: Well, I want to say that I moved to Tucson [Arizona] in April, so—April, May, June, July, August, September—I've been here six months. I grew up here, and I lived in the [San Francisco] Bay Area [Northern California] forty-two years, and I am in a state of culture shock. And there's also very beautiful and good things about being here like the plants and studying the plants and finding medicines for myself and for others, growing right in my own neighborhood.

And I was praying and asking for more queerness because—I have some queerness here in the village, thank goodness and some conscious queerness. My neighbors upstairs are transmen and a non-binary person that is their fiancée. And when they moved in here, I just celebrated because they're here and—but the—[*pause*]

I want my reparations for the complex PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] that I've incurred with racism and white supremacy. I want reparations damn it. I want to be able to go and get whatever I need, as many sessions as I need with my *curandero* [medicine person] or whatever because here I am as an elder and I'm navigating a lot of the harm that happened to me over the seventy years I've been alive in terms of the misogynistic patriarchy that we live in and also the myth and illusion of white supremacy and the racism.

And I just want to say that I prayed, and all of a sudden, I get invited to do this oral history—thank you, Carol. Today's the second day, and I feel so full to the brim of queerness in the way we share queerness and gender and consciousness and—you know. I know there's differences between us and everything, but you know what, I haven't had to monitor you. I don't have to monitor you. [*Laughs*] Even though you have more privileges than I do, I haven't had to monitor. You have been so kind and so generous and so loving and forthcoming! And like I said, my ancestors whisper to me because I asked for all of—I said, "I need some big healing, some ceremonial big healing," and here comes this opportunity to do an oral history, and I'm having it, and I've had it with—I've had it. It's actually occurring, and they say—whisper in my ear, "How do you like us now?" because they're delivering the things that I'm asking for. Even down to the

lunch, the two restaurants I wanted to go to for lunch during these oral histories, I go to go to both of them, both of them and get fed that way.

And I just have felt so safe and so held with you, Carol, thank you, and I'm glad it's you doing this, and I'm full. I'm very full, and I'm very grateful, and I want to leave that message very powerfully is that gratitude is a super power, and I don't mean have gratitude about some tragic thing that happened to you. I'm just saying, look to see the gift inside of whatever has happened because it's there, it's there. And the racism that just happened in my apartment village where I am, the gratitude that I have for the—for that was—and I'm really sorry it happened, but is that I really got wind about the—who's unsafe here in my complex so I can keep myself more safe. And I really am having a conversation with myself that when I need white people to be safe, sometimes I dismiss the red flag, so I can feel some safety, and I needed to do that here because I moved here and I really needed a place to be. And my manager of the building here said, "You're safe here, welcome home."

And that's what they tell everybody, and maybe that's good for some people, but I'm not looking through—I'm seeing the reality of some things that are happening here, and I'm learning how to keep myself more safe. And I did a little bit of organizing with the people of color when this happened, so, around our safety and what we need and each other and all that, so you see that's the grace.

I just want to say thank you. I want to say thank you to James [Arthur] Baldwin who is definitely one of my ancestors and who has inspired me deeply. I want to say thank you to Columbia

University, and I want to say thank you to you, Carol, and you, I thought you'd been doing this for years and years because you're so good at it, you're so good at it. So just a lot of gratitude, and my prayer is that somehow we can continue this work like you suggested in a book. That would be so powerful because my life would have been so different had I had queerness around me as a young person, so, so different. And my physical, emotional, spiritual health would be so different, and I wouldn't have had to spend so much time navigating disability because disability is—the ones that I've very experienced—very connected to the waking up every day in the system that is made and held for especially white men and white folks.

We navigate that every day and most of us are nonviolent and most of us have never harmed anybody that way and everything, so we're the most disciplined. And I'm talking about queer people of color, we're the most disciplined people in the planet as far as I'm concerned. Thank you, mwah [*makes sound of blowing a kiss*].

Q: Thank you so much, Tupili, for all of the wisdoms and stories and insights you have shared, your incredible generosity with this archive and with the world throughout your life. Thank you so much.

Arellano: [*Exhales deeply*].

Q: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]