

I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Tina Valentin Aguirre

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Tina Valentin Aguirre conducted by Caro De Robertis on October 7, 2022 and December 6, 2022. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories 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: Tina Valentin Aguirre      Location: San Francisco, CA

Interviewer: Caro De Robertis      Date: October 7, 2022

Q: Tina, hi, hello, thank you so much for welcoming me here into your home, and for agreeing to talk with me today for this oral history. It is such a joy and honor.

Aguirre: You're welcome. Thank you for interviewing me.

Q: Absolutely. So, to start, could you please tell me your name and who you are.

Aguirre: Sure. My name is Tina Valentin Aguirre, my pronouns are they/them/theirs. I am a transgender, gender queer, Latinx person from San Diego, originally, and I live in San Francisco. I've been here in the Bay area since 1986, and I've been on Sixteenth Street, living in this flat since 1987.

Q: And this is Sixteenth Street in the Mission District of San Francisco?

Aguirre: Yes. It's actually sort of on the border of the Castro and the Mission, and often is called North Mission. Some people will consider it the Castro, some people consider it the Mission, I just consider it home.

Q: So, you physically live in a middle space between a traditionally queer neighborhood and a traditionally Latinx neighborhood?

Aguirre: Yes, although really where I land on this is that Sixteenth Street is its own thing, is its own entity, and the community of Latinx, LGBTQ people living, having business, and families on Sixteenth Street is really what I resonate or connect with. And for me, it sort of starts from the Jose Saria Court that's at the Eureka Valley Library, that's Sixteenth Street, close to Market [Street], and then all the way down to ShopWell, where Mission Neighborhood Health Center is, because that whole corridor at one point had many of us in businesses or organizations or houses, homes. So, yes, Sixteenth Street for me is that. And even though there's been a lot of gentrification and displacement, change where many of us are not here anymore—some of us are still here, and for me that's some important way that I see myself on this land.

Q: Thank you so much. When and where were you born?

Aguirre: I was born in San Diego, in Mercy Hospital, in Hillcrest, which is a gay, queer neighborhood in San Diego. I'm from Logan Heights, so I grew up in Logan Heights, Barrio Logan it's sometimes called, and that's primarily a Mexican-American, Chicano, and black community—at least when I was growing up there. I grew up in the '70s as a kid, and it was almost exclusively brown and black, I think there were maybe two white families in the whole neighborhood. And that meant, that really, I only knew white people from television, we didn't really have close connections with white families. It might surprise people knowing that San Diego is really segregated, it was at least when I was growing up, and what happened was the

schools recognized that as a problem and integrated the schools with bussing in the '70s. So, in fourth grade, it became a bilingual magnet school with some students being bussed in from Point Loma and Ocean Beach, some of the whiter areas. And then, some of us being bussed out to other schools too.

So, yes, I grew up in Logan Heights, and I'm really proud that that informs much of what I use today in terms of social justice activism and community building. My first march was when I was five or six in elementary, where we were marching because, what is now Chicano Park, actually came about over many years. At first it was one small lot, and then it, because we kept marching for it and we asked for resources and for it to get cleaned up, it expanded. Part of that included that the neighborhood was an industrial and residential zoned neighborhood—happens a lot with people of colored communities, low income family neighborhoods, where there were just lots of industrial corporations around us, and for me, how that showed up was the Chicano Park initially was an industrial area under what is Coronado Bridge.

And so, part of that marching and learning about what we needed, we needed parks, we needed places to thrive instead of more fenced-off areas where canisters of toxic chemicals were being stored. And for me, what that taught me is we have to fight for that. Whereas in other neighborhoods where the white kids were coming from, Point Loma and Ocean Beach, they did not live with the industrial slash residential zoning, which meant they did not have that. How that really showed up in a different way is that my elementary, at one point, because they didn't have a lot of money, closed off part of our playground in order to put up some fences and then they could rent that out to local industrial corporations where they literally stored canisters of

chemicals that would leak out. And, not surprisingly, a lot of us ended up with—I had asthma as a kid, and to this day, it's pretty shocking that when I look back and think, oh that's what—even though we were fighting for Chicano Park, we were fighting for extra resources for the expansion of a health center that was in Logan Heights, it's amazing that at the same time, there was toxic waste at our elementary. And then, for people my age, it's easy to see why some of us have chronic respiratory conditions or experience dealing with social justice—in this case, ecological justice, in very real ways. What I'm happy about is learning very quickly that we can create change, and that we can own our neighborhoods, and that we can change what's going on. So, today Logan Heights is a very different place, and I'm happy that I'm a part of that too.

Q: Absolutely. Thank you so much for that. And in thinking about you, at five or six years old, at that first march for justice for the Chicano Park, do you have any memory that you could share of what it was like for you to be there, how it felt in your body, or what you saw or heard, sensed or smelled, can you bring us there a little bit?

Aguirre: Yes, my mom was a teacher's aide so that she could be in my class in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade, and she was there and we just marched together as students, friends, and this was one of the few times when we had our parents all marching with us. And so, a couple of my friends who lived right down up the street from the school, I remember their moms marching with us. One of them, I now know, was a really great leader in the Chicano movement, and I guess for me, what it felt like was a really beautiful day where we got to do this thing as kids and learn about how we can make change. But it was also fun, it was a way for us to have a little bit of fun as kids marching down the street, and so what I remember is that. It was

a very powerful way for us to get out of the school and do something for the community, and even though it was new to me and I didn't completely understand everything that was going on, I understood that we deserved a park. So, it was awesome.

Q: It was awesome. It was powerful, you understood things, and it was fun. In what way was it fun?

Aguirre: It was fun because we were kids and we were marching, and we were able to laugh and joke and participate in a way that was different for us in the neighborhood. In the neighborhood, you know, we could play and have fun and connect with each other, though in the '70s and '80s a lot of times kids were not, let's say, partnering with adults on work, necessarily. In those days it was more like, okay, go outside and play with your friends and do your thing. Whereas this was us, all together, and so, it was fun to be with the adults doing this community work. It was also fun that we were able to be kids and just go to a park.

Q: Yes, wonderful. Thank you. And you mentioned earlier that at the time, when you were growing up or when you were a child in Logan Heights, that there were few, if any, white people, and white people were something you experienced on TV, could you say a little more about looking back now from this life perspective and this moment in your life, could you say more about how you think that shaped or impacted you to have that experience of growing up with brown and black people?

Aguirre: It was pretty positive, although it did create some dissonance or disconnection around who we were versus who everybody else was. And so, for me, what the positives included that we just had—there were families that were connected, and in my neighborhood that meant there was an African-American family, the Sutton family, that was really close with our family. And the mom was a single mother and had kids that hung out with us and often when we would have dinner, my mom would just cook a lot and make enough so that friends could stop by and eat. And so, they would eat with us and now we recognize each other as just part of our chosen family in that way. And I think being in Logan Heights that meant that we were the norm, in terms of brown and black people. It wasn't like we were looked at differently necessarily, in that way.

I also had many cousins and aunts and uncles that lived around where we lived in Logan Heights, and at the time, there were—because it was industrial too, there were canneries, and manufacturing companies where families worked, where people in our community worked. So, it was a tight knit community, and so all that comes with that is a lot of safety, a lot of recognition. Also, though, it meant that everybody was kind of in everybody's business. And so, that was a thing, too. I think in negative terms, what it meant was I didn't really understand that white people were like us. I didn't understand that we were like white people. I really thought we were different, almost like species. It did not really make sense to me, and the way that I experienced that in the media was often, sometimes I would look at a musical and be like, all these white people are singing and dancing, what's going on here. I would think, oh this is probably a world where we don't exist, like we were just not a part of this universe, whatever it is. And so, for me, it made me think much of the content, much of the media that was produced, was science fiction

in some ways. I didn't understand how we were not a part of what I was seeing, and what I attributed that to is that we were not the same.

And so, for me, a silly way or an awful way that I experienced that was the first time that a white person farted around me, I was like, what, I didn't know that white people could fart. I just thought, oh that's us and how we live. And then, I think I said something, like oh my god, what, and it was kind of silly. And I was a kid, and what I learned was oh, that's just, I had no reference for that. And so, I didn't assume that we were the same. Now I know that we have the same biological functions, but the truth is, though we were all humans and we have shared values in terms of needs and what we want in life, how we experience life and how we are treated or how we believe what we can do and how we can do it, there really are big differences. So, I carry that with me in all of my work.

Q: Thank you for those insights, and that vivid example. Could you tell us more about what your childhood was like in terms of your family life?

Aguirre: My family life felt mostly pretty safe, and a lot of that had to do with that my mom and dad were very protective of us. My dad was a Marine, and my mom was a really loving, warm person who people really appreciated in the neighborhood. She also cooked really well, and so people liked her food and being with her. Other women, especially. So, that was really positive. Although, at the same time, my family was really different amongst others in Logan Heights. My mom had dwarfism, so she was a little person and was really short. I think shorter than four feet tall, which meant she stood out. And my brothers, I had two brothers, who also were short, little

people, and then me and my dad were not little people. As a result, what happened was, before going to school I didn't really know that we were different. Once I was in school, I started to learn that we were different. And I started to see how people treated us, in the case of traditional Mexican families, people with dwarfism were given a stereotypes that attached to them in terms of they might be a demon or a bruja or really bad. And so, there were some people who would play that out.

There was a time we went to Tijuana [Mexico] because the border is just right there, and we had families live on both sides of the border, so we went to see one of my grandmother's ex-husband's family, who they stayed connected with. And, one time, we just went shopping in downtown Tijuana, and somebody—a woman who was on the street, I think like selling wares, got her broom and started to hit my mother and called her a bruja because she was little. And we didn't get that kind of treatment in Logan Heights, that extreme form of treatment. I did learn very early on that people can be really mean around differences, and I also learned that people don't expect us to stand up for ourselves in those instances where we're bullied. And so, there were times, say when me and my mom would be on the bus, riding the bus to go to Segunda, or to go to somewhere, and then people would look at my mom or say things to my mom, almost like we didn't understand them. A lot of times, people thought maybe we didn't speak English I think, and of course, we did. And so, my mom was really polite, whereas I was not. At five or six I started to learn, oh, you shouldn't talk to my mother that way, you're not better than her, and you're just being really mean. And I also learned the power of when people say stay in your place, or be quiet, and that a kid or a person like you should not take that kind of tone, I learned, oh sometimes it's good to let them know, nope, that's not acceptable, you're the one that's doing

the wrong thing, and I hope everybody here on this bus sees that you are the one that's doing this thing that's really bad, you should feel really bad. *[Laughs]* And that that is their stuff, and whether or not they feel bad or not, I'm not in control of that, but I am in control of saying this thing that you're doing, it's wrong, and you need to stop. The fact that I was a little kid saying that, and people thought that was inappropriate, I could care less. What I focused on is that the thing that you were doing is inappropriate, and you should check that out.

Q: About how old were you when you started to say that and talk back in places like on the bus?

Aguirre: Like six or seven, I just thought, you know, this is obviously wrong, and I just knew really young that no, if you're going to do that to my mom, who's an extremely positive, loving person, that means that you're going to treat anybody who's different that way. And it really instilled in me that it doesn't have to be me that you're bullying, it doesn't have to be me that you're trying to ostracize, make me feel bad. If you're making somebody else feel bad because they're different than you, the likelihood is that eventually you're going to get to me, you're going to try to do the same thing with me, but I don't need to have that experience for me to know, oh that's wrong, I need to say something. And I also think I learned there's a fine line between civility and complicit behavior in what happens and what we accept. And what I learned was if something is not right, it's not my doing if they respond with violence, that that's their choice, and it's up to me to be able to speak what my truth is and defend myself or my friends or my family, people that I loved, or community members. And what plays out is not all in my control. What I am in control of, though, is telling people really clearly, like, you shouldn't be doing that, and you also don't have the right to touch me or hit me, and if you do, I'm going to

make sure that all of this, where there are witnesses—I did learn really quickly do these things in public with witnesses—and to say out loud, if you do this thing, you want to hit me or you want to push me or you want to do something, I have tons of witnesses and I will make sure that you are punished for it. And I've never been afraid to say, if I need to go to an authority, I need to go to the teacher—if I even need to ask for the police to help protect me and my mom or whoever, that for me, I think, it's not my responsibility to change people's minds, it's my responsibility to protect myself. I have a right, me and my family and my chosen family, my friends, we have a right to live happy lives. And what that means is, it's not my shit if people want to dump on me and my friends, that's theirs, and if I'm just telling them they need to stop and it escalates, I'm okay with it escalating a little bit more to a point where I make clear, well, this is not acceptable. And if you're going to choose violence as a result of that, I'm going to hold you accountable. I'm not afraid of that.

Q: And what did these lessons come to mean to you later, as an openly trans and gender queer person?

Aguirre: It meant that there are times when I've had to make a choice, like on this block, I'm not going to lose this block, or I'm not going to lose this place or this thing, and that if it comes down to a situation where I say, you know what, this is not conquered, this is not an area of farming, an area where you can act like a cowboy, this is all acceptable, or whatever kind of variable you want to put in here, that if I'm in San Francisco, if I'm in my neighborhood, it's not mine to hold that you're afraid of me and you think I'm wrong or something because I exist. If you don't understand what I am or who I am, that's not my business, but if somebody makes it

my business because they want to bully me or try to make me feel bad—even through body language, what I'll say to varying degrees, I'm not going to care that much if I'm outside of my element, but in my element, I won't accept it. And if I go to the Castro, because I live in both the Castro and the Mission, if I go to the Castro and experience any kind of racism or transphobia, I'm really quick to recognize, not only is it not mine, you need to not do that, this is my neighborhood, I live here. If you're visiting, or if you live here and you haven't gotten the sense, the common sense, to treat me like a human being that deserves all of what you deserve, then I'm probably going to let you know. And that's because you've done something to me or my friends in a way that I notice it's egregious.

Mind you, in the Mission, I haven't had that kind of experience, and especially Sixteenth Street going toward the Mission, this has been our space and our land, and I'm really happy that today the area is recognized as part of the American Indian culture district. My day job is that I'm the Director of the Castro LGBTQ culture district, and for me, this work is all tied together around places and how we support each other, how we support culture, we support homes, families, and businesses, and that comes about through policies that are informed by people who lived lives like me where we acknowledge sometimes we have to fight for the right to just be happy where we live, and that shouldn't be, but that's okay. A lot of us are equipped to do this work, and I am one of those people.

Q: Yes, thank you. And one of the experiences that equipped you was this standing up for your mother in public spaces. And one more question about that experience, I wonder whether you

remember anything about how your mother responded when you would stand up for her, anything about how she seemed to feel?

Aguirre: She was happy often, I think she was shocked the first couple times and was worried for me, but then I would explain to her, I'm only going to do this when there are lots of witnesses and I know that we're going to be okay. In Logan Heights, there was a police community program where there was an office next to the teen center and they always had bottled water, they were really friendly—in San Diego, and in Logan Heights in particular, the water was always pretty bad, and so often, they had come to our classes to introduce themselves, they were police that were part of the community. And so, I would feel comfortable with my friends going into their place. They always said if you want to stop by you can have a cup of water and go on your way, and so we would. And what I shared with my mom is I know who I can go to, I know who will protect us. It's the police who do their rounds in Logan Heights, they know me, they're going to know you, and we're going to be okay.

In those times, there was police brutality, there was police harassment, it usually showed up though in ways when people are driving. So, let's say my dad, my family knew, that if you were driving you would probably get pulled over more than a white person. And we also knew there were some neighborhoods that were much worse, National City, was really known as a neighborhood south of San Diego city, where the cops would regularly pull over cars that they thought maybe were low-riders, and my dad owned a '57 Chevy station wagon, which was not a low-rider, but it was a nice car that could go down the street with the low-riders, and later had an

Oldsmobile Impala, which was a big car that could be like a low-rider. So, what I grew up with was knowing that cops played multiple roles.

Q: I see. Where did your parents grow up and how did they meet?

Aguirre: They grew up in San Diego, too. Our families, Comachos [*phonetic*] are my mom's side, Comacho and Hacoma [*phonetic*], and my dad's Aguirre, and they knew of each other's families. My dad was friends with my mom's older brother, and I think they met in a September Mexican festival, is it Mexican Independence Day—I forget, and I should know, but I don't—and I think they had gone to Tijuana for a fair to mark the holiday, and that's, I think, where they first met. And then, in Logan Heights they started going to the community center, Logan Heights neighborhood center would have dances, and I guess this was like the '50s, and maybe early '60s, where they would listen to bands that would play. And yes, that's how they came together.

Q: Paints a vivid picture of those times as well. Could you talk about how you experienced your gender and your queerness as a child? What some of the seeds were in your childhood of who you are today, those parts of you.

Aguirre: My mom and my grandmother and my tias all informed a lot of what I live with in terms of gender. As a little kid, I often would be in the kitchen with my mom or my tias and I just felt more comfortable, and that was tough because I was expected to play with boys, being assigned male at birth meant that there were lots of expectations. And they started very quickly.

And I think for me, in particular, in my small family, with my mom, and my dad, and my brothers, me not being a little person, that my mom and dad both really wanted me to have kids and they had their own ideas around what I should do and how I should live.

Q: You were their only child who was not a little person, and so they had those—

Aguirre: Yes, they had different expectations for me, and so, they really did try to force me to do what they wanted. It took a great deal of work to push against that. In a simple way, let's say, when I wanted dolls or makeup as a kid, they made it really clear I was not going to get that. And when I insisted, because I was like, I have rights too, as a kid I should be able to get what I want, so like, at the time, I think there was—I don't know if it was Farrah Fawcett makeup doll head that you could buy and put makeup on, or like Barbies and stuff, like Barbies where the hair could grow out or something, there were dolls like that, that I wanted. And then my cousins, I remember one year where we were all like, yes, that's what we want. And they got that, and I got like a G.I. Joe doll, and I was really insulted, and I was like, obviously you mean this for my brothers, because this is not what I wanted—kind of like when Divine is in pink, I think, is it Female Trouble, Pink Flamingos, I think it's Female Trouble, where she doesn't get her cha-cha heels and ruins Christmas, I know I ruined at least one Christmas because I didn't want a god damn G.I. Joe doll, that was not the same. And so, I did not accept it, I was like, that's not my gift, Santa needs to do better. So, stuff played out like that.

At the same time, I didn't have to, as a kid, I didn't have to wear makeup or anything for me to confuse people in terms of gender. It just kind of happened, like not only did I feel different,

people saw me as different. So, sometimes people would think, oh, I had lipstick on when I didn't, or that I had on mascara, when I didn't, and what I learned pretty early on is oh you're reading something that is here. I don't know exactly how this is happening, but there is something here. When I look at some photos I think, oh, that's pretty obvious what's going on there. And I think it was tough for my dad, in particular. I think pretty early on, I think my mom shared with me, we talked about this stuff, and what she shared is that she was okay with me being feminine, and that was because before me, she and my dad had decided they would only have one more kid—I was the youngest—and so she got pregnant, and they had a car accident, she had a miscarriage, and the child was a little girl. I think she was like six months pregnant. And so, they were horribly disappointed, and for her it was really dangerous to have kids as a little person, she had to have cesareans each time, and what they told her each time is it's really dangerous because of her body issues, that she could easily die and they did not recommend her to have kids. In those days, the medical industry was really bad in terms of how they acknowledged people, little people, and how they should be able to live lives and thrive and have kids if they wanted. So, what she was told after the miscarriage was she definitely should not have another kid. But they decided to try again, and she really wanted a girl, what it was.

She had two boys and really wanted a girl, and then when she had me and she realized that I was feminine, she said, well, this is kind of what I always wanted anyway. And so, she was accepting of that, and then started to teach me her recipes and started to have me around when she was with my tias, her comadres, and then I learned how women really support each other, and that men might be doing whatever they're doing in the house, and the women would be keeping it together and supporting each other. And also, the '70s when I was really little, they were beautiful and

they knew how to present themselves in strong, affirming ways, and that is what I grew up with. I also grew up seeing them and helping my mom and my tias, let's say, put on the dresses, zip up the dresses, put on their shoes, help them with their makeup and hair, and so, I learned really quickly, in my early teens, how to do like liquid eyeliner, and how to do hair, and how to put together looks. Like, really young I would start to help my mom pick her outfits, pieces for outfits and looks, and I just always kind of had that, and—

Q: This is young, like early teens?

Aguirre: Like, younger, probably pre-teens, yes. Just because, I was always with her, and yes, I just always kind of had that. I think what it is is that she understood that my version of femininity was strong and beautiful, and that I was taking what was around me and putting it in what I wanted and what I needed, and then she likes that. She knew from a young age, that for me, femininity means you should still be kick-ass, obviously, because you're all kick-ass, so I just led with it. I led with I think what they were kind of keeping under wraps for strategically or tactically, makes sense for them, but for me, that never made sense.

Q: Do you have any particular moments that you recall where you may have experienced gender euphoria as a young person? Any particular moments or stories that rise to mind?

Aguirre: A couple. One was a trans black woman who would walk around my elementary school, it was fourth grade, and at that point I had met two friends who are gay Chicanos, and one was really effeminate at the time, and so for me, his name was Anselmo [*phonetic*] or

Chemy, Chemy and I always stood out as super effeminate, queer kids. And our other friend Ruben, we hung out together, and we would see this black trans woman who would walk by, I would walk up to the fence and she would wave and I would wave, and eventually she would start to talk to us. And the teachers would say don't do that, don't talk to adults, and that made sense, but for me, that moment of, oh I'm in Logan Heights, there's somebody who's different like me, and she's just living her life, going getting her groceries and walking down, also I think she started to see, oh there's this baby queer trans person, I'm just going to say hi and talk if they want to talk. And so that was a first time I thought, oh, yes.

I think another time was when my mom caught me using her makeup. And what happened was she and my dad were going to go grocery shopping and I wanted to stay home so that I could practice using her makeup—I think I was fifteen maybe—and she had forgotten something, so they came back early, before they went to the grocery store, and she saw me using her makeup, I think I was using her eyeliner and mascara, and she was like, “What are you doing?” and I said, oh, ah, I thought you were going grocery shopping. And she said, oh I forgot something, she said, are you putting on my makeup, and I said, yes, and she said, oh okay. You should have just told me you wanted your own makeup, I'll buy you some makeup, do you want me to buy you some makeup, and I said, yes. And she did. And so, at the grocery store she bought me my first eyeliner and mascara and then we practiced, and I got really good at it. And then—

Q: How did it feel in your body to be able to do that and have that welcome?

Aguirre: It was amazing. I thought, oh, I don't have to hide this. Not only do I not have to hide this, my mom recognizes me for what I am, and I am part of this lineage of strong femmes in our family. We are strong, kick-ass femmes. And I think she was really happy about that, too. I'm happy about that.

Q: What a gift. It's a beautiful story, thank you.

Aguirre: At the same time, there were lots of things that were really difficult. And growing up in Logan Heights, which was a dangerous place in many ways, I think in retrospect I understand now when I tell people I'm from Logan Heights, and if they know what that is, sometimes people will have a response, like a oh, oh my god, you're from Logan Heights, how was it, like how did you survive kind of thing. And so, there was danger. I think other times when I had a euphoria, a joy, about gender was with my friend Chemy when we—so, I started using makeup, he also started to use makeup. It was more like goth, girl, punk rock makeup, so in the '80s it was a thing. And so, we would put on makeup when we were going to high school and ninth, tenth grade, and that was it's own thing. Where like, we would go to the bus stop, because we were bussed to Point Loma to go to school, and we would wait for the bus down the street from where we lived, and people from the neighborhood that we knew from elementary would all get onto busses and go to schools, and they knew us and saw us wearing makeup. And for me, the euphoria, the joy, there was we're doing this, even though you don't like it. And even though you don't accept it, and it's not your business, and sometimes people would ask us, like why do you have makeup on, and usually we would just say, oh it's Tuesday, or we look pretty. That's it. Why are you asking me this? This should not be a thing.

Q: Amazing. Are there any other memories with regard to your gender, your queerness, your truth, in your high school years that rise to mind?

Aguirre: For me, one thing that pops out is the discrimination by teachers. So, what I'm happy about these days, is that at least in many cities that that's not the case anymore. But, at the time, in high school, I had a teacher—and I got good grades, I was a very good student, and that meant that I had good communication with teachers often to try to figure out what is it that they want in order to get the grades that I wanted. And one of the teachers in my AP History class, U.S. History class, was a white man, who maybe was gay, I don't know, sometimes some of the worst things that I've gotten have been from closeted or even out queer people who just did not like that I was maybe pushing things too far for them, but maybe it's okay to be an acceptable queer, or even an acceptable trans person, versus I don't really care about that stuff so much. And so, in class in this one class in eleventh grade, I remember a teacher calling me out and making fun of me before the class started, saying, "Oh, I really like your eyeliner, I really like your lace gloves,"—I had lace gloves, Prince was popular, and Madonna, and I was like, oh thanks, and he made a joke and continued on that, and the class, the kids that were there started to laugh, and so, what I said was, well you should like all of it, you gave it all to me last night at the hotel. And then, he was like, what did you just say, and I was like, you heard me, you bought me all of this so of course you like it. And then he said that is completely wrong, and if you don't want to get sent to the principal's office you need to stop. And I said, you're the one who's trying to bully me and make fun of me in my own class, so do you want me to go to the principal's office, I'm happy to go tell the principal what you said and what you did. And he said, class open the book

to page 232. And so, for me, that was an example of how I needed to stand up for my right. And I definitely would have been happy to go speak to the principal easily, I would have gotten him written up.

Q: Thank you so much for that story. I think these stories are going to mean so much to so many people for many decades to come.

Aguirre: Thank you.

Q: For now, last question about high school years, how did you identify in those years? Were you out to yourself in some way, what meaning did you make? Today, currently in 2022 we have certain lexicons and vocabularies of queer possibility, many words, but at the time, was there any language you had for yourself and for who you were in terms of gender and/or queerness? I don't even want to put the word queerness on it [*laughs*], what language did you have yourself, how did you understand yourself, were there any terms you resonated with or ways that you were out to yourself about who you were in those years?

Aguirre: Yes. Queerness and gender was obvious, or let's say played out in ways that were really obvious, in especially my case and in my best friend Anselmo's case, where we would get picked on even if we weren't wearing makeup. So, for us, it really was well, if you're going to pick on us anyway, we might as well look really good while you're doing it. I don't really care. We didn't care about that, but we didn't have a language around it really. Other than, let's say, the black trans woman in elementary, there weren't really out trans people in Logan Heights, and

there weren't any in the media that looked like us or that we knew of, and queers were on television in like really horrible, stereotypical ways, although sometimes they were interesting. So, I remember Flip Wilson, there was a Flip Wilson show when I was very little, where he was a black comedian who had a variety show, and he had a character, Geraldine, who was a female character, and what I now would recognize as a drag persona, who would go off and was really funny. And so, I remember looking at that and thinking oh, yes, I understand that, I know that that's Flip Wilson as Geraldine, I understand that. And instead, what it was, I think, we created our own languages or our own codes, and so, for us, that revolved around like Wonder Woman, Linda Carter as Wonder Woman, and Lindsey Wagoner as the bionic woman, and how in Charlie's Angels there were strong, feminine characters in the media, that then we would emulate. So, like me and Anselmo and Ruben, lesser because he was more conservative in terms of gender, but he still liked it all, and so we would joke about these things, but we didn't say, oh this is because we're queer, or this was because we're trans or playing with gender.

What we did learn though was there was underground media representations that became in the mainstream eventually. So, like Culture Club was a part of that, Prince was a part of that, even when my mom would play records, and I would see Little Richard was one of my mom and dad's favorite musicians, and I could see, even in the '70s and '80s he would come out in full makeup and full basically drag, that there were examples that I could see in mainstream media, but the underground network was more like USA Network had a tv show on the weekends called Night Flight that had punk shows and cult movies that they would play. And they included sometimes The Hunger with Catherine Deneuve and David Bowie, and so for me, what I learned

was a language that was separate from our daily lives that didn't quite, wasn't really our language, but we learned to adapt some of those codes.

What we recognized was that we were goth, so it was easy to say oh I'm a goth girl, or I'm just goth. And what that means is yes, we use makeup and we went to—in high school there was an underage dance club where it was queer, it was bi, it was trans friendly, and we just were all playing out these things, even down the street from our high school at one point there was a goth underage dance club that opened up that was once a week, and we went to that, and in school, people would know who kind of went there. And in that context, we would just say yes, we go there, and it's a lot of fun. So, we found ways to make it work, but it really was not like today. It really was very different.

It also was gender queer in a way that I kept that part with me. So, what I learned was, pretty early on, oh, they're not one hundred percent on one side of the gender spectrum, and for me, that's what I understood as yes, that's me. And let's say Boy George, what I learned later was he was informed by the punk movement in the U.K., and Lee Bowery, who was more of a performance artist and that all human representation is a construct. And that it can be art, we can be art. We are art. And that I am what I need to be in that moment, and if that includes that my gender then I'm gender queer. And so, when I went to college and I started to use makeup, and I would get the same dumb questions, like why do you have lipstick and makeup on while you're going to tutor this kid from East Palo Alto [California], and I'd say, oh you know, because I look pretty, and where's the kid. And what I learned was even then, there wasn't exactly a language for it. Actually, the language has not become mainstream, it didn't become mainstream until like

2018 or 2019 when the state of California agreed to have people—you could go to the DMV and change your gender marker, and the first week that was possible I did that. I also changed my name, because I wanted people to know. Because I'd gone by Tina since I came to college, and worked at CURAS—when I started working and I found Sixteenth Street very quickly, a lot of the people were like, oh Valentina, and they just called me Tina for short. So, that's how, since then I've had lots and lots of people that I love who knew me as just Tina. And so, with the first chance possible I had a friend of mine who's a lawyer help me with the paperwork to change my name at the same time that I changed my gender marker. That was the first time when I learned, oh society has caught up to what I've always been.

It also is that the concept of transgender, the umbrella of transgender, was really closed before. It was much more like you had to have body surgeries, you had to, literally, for the U.S. government, for you to be accepted as trans or the opposite sex you had to be in medical care, which is a very clinical way to look at this. How that translated in community was there were people who did have medical transitions who looked on some of us who did not have medical transitions or were not on hormones, as not being trans. So, for me, society has caught up with me and my peers in ways that younger people now definitely understand what I am, who I am, but that is actually less than five years old.

Q: What was it like for you to encounter those experiences within queer or trans communities of maybe some of the trans folks who've had medical transition looking at you as less than or not fitting a box, or the acceptable boxes of the trans experience? Do you have any examples of any

particular experiences within community, maybe in earlier times in the late '80s and '90s, any particular stories about that?

Aguirre: I do. Some of the people that I met early on when I got here were Mahogany and Ronnie Salazar and Teresita la Campesina, who all did drag on Sixteenth Street and in San Francisco. Teresita was our trans mother, and she was older than us and had an operatic voice and she sang rancheras, and she was a sex worker and was a loud, loud person who took up lots of space. And she was Mexican-American, but she spoke mostly Spanish, and her Teresita la Campesina was what she adopted, but she was never a campesina, that was her persona, and she had breast augmentation and she maybe was on hormones, I think it depended on what she wanted. It was not a constant for her. She was pretty. So, she taught me in conversations, pretty quickly, she adopted me as one of her children, along with Ronnie and Mahogany. We were just her children. And—

Q: Were you still a student at Stanford at the time?

Aguirre: No, I had left Stanford so I guess I'm skipping forward a little bit.

Q: I know, we're moving fluidly through time, but you came to the Bay area at first to study at Stanford in 1986, so when did you become one of Teresita's children?

Aguirre: In '87 I wrote an article on Latinos in AIDS for a journal at Stanford, *Estos Tiempos*, was a Chicano more avant garde journal. There was also the *Mecha* publication that was really

traditional, and they were really anti kind of queer, anti-radical feminists in obvious ways that I thought, oh, this is not for me. And so, I proposed to do an article on Latinos in AIDS, because I knew people who had AIDS, somebody in high school that I went to school with died in '86 or '87, and so, I knew, oh this is affecting us and we need to talk about it. So, I interviewed people in San Francisco that included Instituto Familia de la Rasa, they had a Latino AIDS project, Mission Neighborhood Health Center, Shanti Project, AIDS Health Project, San Francisco AIDS Foundation, and asked them, like what are you doing, and how are you doing it, and then quickly I learned oh, they're not talking to each other, and there's not enough funding, and things are getting desperate. And there was not a plan. And so, I wrote this into an article, and through that article, I learned about like what was in San Francisco.

And around the same time, I had taken a class by Juana Alicia, who is an artist, who that's one of her pieces, and she is a Chicana muralist artist, who came out of like the '60s and '70s who sort of thinking of we can be whatever we want to be. And the class that she taught on muralism really brought to us as students the idea of gender and radical feminism in the context of Chicano culture. And when we met, we connected very quickly and we had this mural, that I can send you a picture of, where I had an idea that like six of us, student artists, and one of the ideas that we landed on was my idea around Black Velvet ads or liquor ads that were all over the barrios. Any people of color like neighborhoods in the U.S. at the time, had massive advertising by liquor and cigarette tobacco companies, and they were the only times when you would see women of color really as sex objects trying to sell liquor or cigarettes. And so, my idea for this mural was let's have one of those ads for Black Velvet on fire burning up and out of the flames emerge five strong women, Latina Chicanas, and Juana Alicia loved it and we ended up painting it. And it

was an awesome experience. As we started to connect, she asked me, do you know about Sixteenth Street, do you know about San Francisco, and I said no, I really came out of Tijuana, I don't really know it yet. And she said, oh you have to go, there's people that you probably would like to meet. And I said, oh I want to, but you know, going to San Francisco from Palo Alto, it's a big thing, I don't know, where would I stay. And she said you could stay the night at my house, if that's what you want to do, she lived around the Haight with Emmanuel Montoya. And so, I said yes, okay, and I stayed at her house and went to Esta Noche for the first time. I wasn't old enough—I think I got in, they were not always strict about carding people, and I remember I got in and—

Q: And Esta Noche is a bar?

Aguirre: Esta Noche was a bar that was on Sixteenth Street, and was a queer Latino bar, and where there were lots of drag performers and that block connects with Valencia, which had at the time a very strong lesbian presence. And then, that particular intersection of Sixteenth and Valencia was a mix of all that. And it was amazing. So, what happened was I met Marcos Rodriguez there, I met also my first partner, we met really quickly and had a super brief conversation and he was like, oh you need to meet one of my friends, Marcos, and then when I spoke with him and I mentioned that I'd written this article on Latinos in AIDS, he's like oh, you need to meet Rodrigo Reyes, you need to meet Diane Felix, you need to meet these people. And we need writers. I didn't exactly understand what he meant, but really it meant that they needed grant writers, they needed writers for cultural work. And then, also I met some of the girls

outside, a lot of the girls would hang out outside and that's how I met Ronnie and Mahogany and Teresita.

And so, what happened was at Stanford I was having a culture shock because it was so clean and antiseptic, and just because there was Latinos, and my first year I lived in Casa Zapata, and I still had great culture shock. And because what I found was me coming from Logan Heights was kind of an extreme version of being Chicano. Like, being around Chicano Park and activism as a kid, and like all of it meant when I met kids, Chicanos especially, from all over the country they didn't have that experience necessarily, and maybe they had money, maybe they had access to privilege in ways that I did not. And so, when I was there, often I connected more with the workers because they were more like the people that I grew up with. And so, it showed up in ways, people didn't know where to like find the toilet paper when the toilet paper ran out in the bathrooms, and I'd be like, it's over there, and they'd be like, why do you know that, and I was like, I know Jose told me because I asked him the last time it ran out. And they would just look at me like what, and what I learned is oh, this is too different for me, I don't understand it.

And I got chicken pox when I was nineteen, eighteen, nineteen, and I was in the infirmary for like two, three weeks—getting chicken pox as an adult is a very dangerous thing, and what happened was I had already met my first partner who had become my first partner, Robert, and I decided to just leave because I had to like drop out of that quarter of Stanford. And at Stanford you don't drop out, once you're accepted you can stop out and then you can come back whenever you want, so that's like height of privilege shows up that way, which I thought, okay, I'm going to use this privilege. And I came to San Francisco and decided I need to find myself

here, I already know some people, and I can tell this is where I fit in, this is where there are people like me. And so, I moved here and stopped out and started doing community outreach on Sixteenth Street. At the time I was a volunteer passing out condoms for the Latino AIDS Project. And then that's how I got to meet Teresita and Mahogany and Ronnie.

Q: Did you move in with your partner, Robert?

Aguirre: I did. So, it's actually this flat, I moved here in 1987 and I've been here since then.

Q: And so, doing this community outreach work and being in San Francisco, you met Teresita and developed those relationships, became one of Teresita's children—

Aguirre: Oh, your initial question was around gender and let's say the separation let's say the people who have medical procedures and then those of us who didn't, and really it came down to Teresita, which is how I kind of brought that up, was that Teresita did have breast augmentation, and we had a—so, she's my mother, one of her sisters was Elena, or Felicia Flames, Felicia Elizondo, she had lots of names like all of us, Felicia was her sister and I met her really quickly. And they were all sex workers, so they were sex workers together in the Polk and south of Market, wherever kind of areas. And Elena had full surgery and was designated as a woman by the federal government, right, so for us, she would lord that over us in a way that, she'd be like oh you're not a real woman, she'd say to Teresita, you're not a real trans person, you're a transvestite. And so, there was a difference between trans women and transvestites and drag queens.

And so, Elena would say this, and then Teresita could care less, she was like, well that's because I don't need all of that and I'm happy with what I am. And what she would say is I'm a man and a woman, I am both. I'm not trying to fool anybody, I'm not trying to trick anybody, I'm not—that's what I am and you like it or you don't, it doesn't matter. If you like it, you're going to pay for it, because she was a sex worker, so and you need to give me the money first, is what she taught me. So, I learned take care of business and if people want to focus on what you are or what you're not by their own definitions, that's their business. And it's okay to tell them no, that you don't get the right to tell me what I am. At the same time, she didn't have any shame around that, so I connected with her, and so did Ronnie and Mahogany because we were on a continuum of gender where some of us did get stuff done, not all of us did. And it was okay. Teresita let us know it's okay, whatever it is, I'm here for you and we're here for each other. And there are lots of people who are going to give us hassles and problems, we should not give ourselves hassles and problems. There are plenty of people who are going to do that for us, we don't need to do that to each other.

Q: And how did you understand your gender in those years? Did you then carry yourself as trans, did you identify as a trans woman? How did you make sense of the dynamics of that cultural moment?

Aguirre: I did wear lipstick, and I did wear makeup, and lots of people knew me as Tina, and I, at the time, gender fuck was what the term was, in like club kids. And that's what I understood, oh

yes, I am gender fuck. And gender queer is now what's an acceptable version of gender fuck, but that's ultimately that's what I am. And—

Q: And so, you knew yourself at the time, you knew yourself and owned yourself to be gender fuck. You were like, oh yes, that's me, that's what I am. So, you always knew that and held it with that language at the time?

Aguirre: I did. Although, I didn't always say that. So, some queenas, we would. The queenas, where we would talk about what we're doing, because that's always a thing, if we care and love for each other, some of us are going to have procedures or medications or things done. And so, we would tell each other. So, let's say in the last year, I learned Mahogany had bottom surgery, which is awesome and I always knew, all of us knew, oh Mahogany is, that's her goal. And the fact that we met in the late '80s and she finally had, she's finally achieved her goal in 2021, is amazing. Also amazing, the other amazing thing, is we have stayed in contact and kept up with each other. So, right before she was going to have the surgery, we talked, and she was like, hey I'm going to get my bottom surgery, and she was really excited. And it's an example of how we never had expectations that it all had to get figured out, we just knew that we were family. Instead, what it is is we knew that some of us had different goals, and some of us were going to always be okay not having surgery or going on hormones.

It played out, though, in ways where some people thought oh, you're not femme enough, or you're not a woman. And they would think that they could treat us different. I never cared about that stuff either. And sometimes people would say oh, you're not—let's say at a trans bar, or a

bar where it's different than a lesbian bar, it's different than a gay bar, a trans bar where let's say men are looking for trans femmes, it's this own kind of thing, and so there were times when trans women who had medical work done, where they would think oh, you shouldn't be here, or you're not a woman, or you're not trans enough—at the time, trans really meant that, and I would say, well let's see how this plays out. Because they would often think, oh nobody's going to pay attention to you, and you don't fit in here. And I'd be like okay, let's see who actually gets what's going on here, and it always happened. So, there were times where some people were really wrecked that I was able to—that what it is, is I think people pick up on what you are, even if it's not one hundred percent a binary, and that's what if people are attracted to you or that's what people like, it doesn't really matter what you say or they're going to pick up on it and they're going to be attracted to it. It's up to me to say yes or no. But I know that, I've always known that. It doesn't always make sense, like attraction and who we love is not a rational thing always, and I learned really early on, oh I don't need to analyze this, I don't need to understand it completely. If somebody is into me, and I'm into them, then that's the deal.

Q: And it sounds like once you were in queer community you were always able to find attraction and/or connections as who you were.

Aguirre: Yes. I think what I learned later was I need for this other person to be able to be okay enough with themselves that we can be out in the open. Because it's really easy for people to be like on the down-low date trans people, and what I learned was, well, no. I am public. The work that I have done in the community has been very public-facing, and so, let's say when I was volunteering on HIV stuff, pretty quickly I tapped into policy work. There was a Latina coalition

on AIDS that I was a part of in 1990, and because my mentor Rodrigo Reyes did policy work, was a playwright, was a cultural producer and HIV educator, he had done a movie called “Ojos que Noven” the first thing for queers on HIV prevention and Latinos, and so for me, what I learned was I brought all of me to all of these roles. And there were times when I was in conversations with the Department of Public Health, not that long ago I found a letter—I ended up becoming the chair of the Latino Coalition on AIDS in like 1991, so how that happened, and I was like twenty—I don’t know, twenty-three, twenty-four—it was because generationally there were gaps because of AIDS, but also because I was so heavily recruited. And now I understand, oh that was a completely intentional—this is how sometimes movements strategically pick people and then put them into positions of leadership, it’s not necessarily because, let’s say, I wasn’t saying oh, I need to do this, I need to be a public figure, it was more oh, we’re dying, if I’m the one that can easily stand up and speak and write and eviscerate really poor models through policy work, connecting it to real life experiences, there’s not really a good response other than yes, we need to give you more money so that you can do the work.

Eventually we got data through knowledge attitude behavioral studies to back up what we were putting out. So, anyway, I would show up as me in these meetings, and I would use my gender honestly as a way to confuse people. So, what I found is oh, somebody really wants to focus on how pretty I am and what kind of lipstick I’m using or whatever, good because I’m going to follow it up with why have you done such a poor job in distributing millions of dollars and that’s resulting in our deaths, let’s get to the point now. Often, I was like, I’m going to use this as the entrée where you’re disarmed by me using Lancôme lipstick or Chanel lipstick and then I’m going to go for the throat and get what I came here for. I also learned through my mentors, and

from what I experienced as a kid, do things in public and do things with witnesses, and get everything documented. And if you want to be an asshole, and you choose to do that with me over and over again, you're going to do that in public. I'm going to have lots of evidence to use against you. I've always known that that's an important thing. I think growing up with Watergate as a kid, I knew oh, get the assholes on recordings, get the assholes with witnesses. I was really little, but I knew enough, oh if they could take out a President because he's an asshole, anybody can get taken out. So, what I learned there was yes, gender is a part of what I brought to all of this work, and it also can be a tool. People were confused by gender, that's okay, I can use that.

Q: And so, you got called in to take leadership as an activist in a great deal of community work. Can you talk more about some of the organizations that you became involved with and had leadership in?

Aguirre: Yes. So, I did partner as a volunteer with the Latino AIDS Project, and had sisters who worked there. Juan Rodrigues and Martin Orineles [*phonetic*] were people working in full Latino context. So, Instituto Familiar de la Raza was a mental health organization here that paralleled what I grew up with in Logan Heights, where there was the Logan Heights health center and community center, and so for me, when I got here I realized oh, that makes sense, let me go volunteer with them, they have a Latino AIDS Project. And I started doing work with Mission neighborhood health center in 1990 as admin assistant because they—I didn't know, but they hired me as an admin assistant but they actually wanted a grant writer. And they had asked if I would do some grant work, and I said I had never done it so, no, and they said okay, how about admin assistant, and I said sure. And so, after like three months they were like our grant writer's

really too busy, can you help her with this one grant, and I said sure, and then when I actually learned what the task was, she was like, I'm going to teach you about this for an hour, then you're going to do it. I was like what, and then I did it, and then I got it.

So, I got the first grant for—what happened was the Mission neighborhood health center started an early intervention HIV program called Clinic Esperanza, and it was not yet open. So, I was part of the staff right when it was still getting created, and we developed the clinic, that's still there, by the way, it's a part of Mission health center, and then this grant that I wrote was for clinical trials, because at the time, Latinos, people of color, trans and women were being left out of all of these things. And so, the only way we could get them was to write our own grants. And so, I wrote a grant that was in that for clinical trials for AIDS medications, and when we got it, I said oh good, and they said, yes, you're a grant writer. I learned, ah crap, this was a trap. But I have great pride in that, and that institution is still there, that program is still there.

By the way, there were closeted lesbians in all of these organizations. Or maybe closeted is in parentheses and has an asterisk next to it, because sometimes they were out to like me, and out to a few others, very few others, so—like the executive director of Mission neighborhood health center, when I was there, was Gladys Sanolin [*phonetic*], and she was a Chicana movement activist who was put into this position, who was a closeted lesbian and was partnered with the medical director, an Italian doctor, Antonia Segeri [*phonetic*], and they didn't tell people about this, but they knew that they could be open with me and my boss, Rodolfo Mata [*phonetic*], as the head of the HIV clinic. And then, we welcomed Sandra Hernandez who was a doctor who became the head of the AIDS office at the time, later she became the head of San Francisco

Department of Public Health, she is a Chicana lesbian. Fabulous person, she's super smart, and we're friends still. We met in 1990, maybe '89.

And so, what I learned was, oh we are everywhere, of course I've known that we're everywhere, but I literally learned, oh there's Estella Garcia's a lesbian at Instituto Familiar de la Raza, I don't know if Concho Alsero [*phonetic*] maybe was queer, but she was the ED there at the time. Estella's now the ED, she's been there for like twenty something years as the ED. And Gladys was a lesbian at Mission neighborhood health center, when she retired Brenda Story, who became head of the HIV program, is now the ED and she's a lesbian, Latina, and so, I've been connected to these strong lesbian leaders in our community, but also acknowledging that gender is so heavy in our community that in many ways there were restrictions on how they could show up, and how they could be out. I never had that as a privilege, like I've never had that ability to blend in or to like not be out. I just get outed walking down the street, I think.

Q: You've never had the privilege to sort of pass as a cis straight person?

Aguirre: Never, ever. I've never had that. So, I've accepted it and learned, oh I'm special. Like, good, okay, then yes, you're right, I am different. And what happened was, Mission neighborhood health center, Instituto, all had remnants of homophobia, transphobia, even misogyny that was built into it. When I looked at how it was playing out, for how limited strong women could be, for me, that's an aspect of how misogyny works, that they can't be their full selves in those roles. For me, my question was well then how the hell can I be my full self here, I can do a lot of good, I can make a lot of change, but are they going to keep thinking I should tone

things down, I'm outrageous—I am outrageous, I am eloquent, I am going to tell you what I think. Life is short. I don't have time to do otherwise.

And so, what I learned was, oh, I'm too much for these places. And I know enough from the initial article I wrote at Stanford, how there's great disfunction and how it plays out in macro and mini ways for us as people in the systems, and how the systems perpetuate themselves, they don't perpetuate human development, they don't contribute great to human development of people who are in those systems. And instead, I was recruited by Rodrigo and others to be the first staff at CURAS, which was the Community United Responds to AIDS Siva [*phonetic*] that came about, I think in 1987, but the first contract actually came out, as a result out of the work of the Latino Coalition that we were saying, we need to do our own programs. We are the experts. Give us the money, get out of the way and shut up. We know what to do, we're doing it, just we're not getting paid for it.

So, eventually we did get a contract, and then I left Mission neighborhood health center to work at CURAS, which was openly queer, openly trans, and openly feminist. And for the time, radical feminists with a brown and black people of color blends, because not just radical feminists, like we were—like Gloria Azalua [*phonetic*] and Sherri Moraga were our peers, like we were all doing cultural work around the same time. Rodrigo, my mentor, was a peer of Sherri, Rodrigo was a playwright, Sherri was a playwright, for us at CURAS we just saw like, oh, this is, we're just part of this bigger community. Of course, we deserve an organization. Of course, we should be leading it, we're the ones, we know what we need. So, yes, I think I've always kind of embraced that not only do I fit in organizations, actually, I have to help lead some of these

organizations. Like, there's a responsibility, an obligation, that comes with my privilege of knowing about community needs and learning and then, like, going to Stanford and the privilege that comes with that. And the abilities to be able to advocate on our behalf, those are all skills and talents and privileges that come with it that I have to use, I should use, like it would be a shame if I just sold insurance or was an AVON lady or something, you know—the options were just like they didn't make sense for me, and so what I just figured was, oh, I should just do what I've always done, which is fight and be glamorous as hell. Let's take a break so I could use the restroom.

So, with CURAS, I joined CURAS as a staff person, and part of that experience was that we did develop our own programs, we developed our own model. And it was inclusive in terms of gender, and that was new and it came with many successes but also a lot of challenges. The successes were that we did do outreach for women with AIDS. Margarita Benítez, I might be getting her last name wrong, but she was one of the first Latinas with AIDS who was a lesbian who was an activist who informed our work. Her partner, Guillermina Aguila [*phonetic*] was on staff with us at CURAS. And part of what we were experiencing were men who have sex with men really getting upset that we were starting to use community resources for women and transgender women. And they let us know in very clear ways, really strong, threatening ways.

And how that played out is our open house at CURAS—we operated out of the Notre Dame building across the street from Mission Delores in San Francisco—the Notre Dame building was a convent for nuns of that order, and then used as community spaces where people could rent rooms for offices or art studios. It persists as that, although there's a school in the back, at the

time we rented our office and started our programs, and had an open house. And there was a group called GASA, which was a men's Latino group that didn't have queer in its mission, wasn't out, these were for primarily closeted Latino men who had aspirations to be middle or upper class, like business people, business men especially, and their ideas of propriety and gender were really strict. Mind you, we were friends with some of them, and I knew one of the leaders.

And often, people were trying to recruit me for different groups because they could see that I was doing a lot of great community work and could be a representative. It's not a role that I actually enjoyed that much, I don't like getting up in front of a mic and speaking, necessarily, or playing an advocate role. It's just something that I'm good at, and on occasion I will really relish it. But most of the time, I see it as, oh, this is a means to an end. It's not something that makes me super happy. The outcome makes me happy, the act of it does not. But, one of the groups that tried to recruit me into its leadership was GASA, and I said no. Their approach was we're of the elite, and we're here to take us to the next place. And my thought was no, that's not—I don't buy into any of this stuff. Anybody who approaches me with that kind of thinking, I usually think no, I don't need your notion of elitism. And so, I said no, actually your ideas are a little outmoded for me, and your approaches leave lots of people out. So, I'm going to be over here doing this other work, and you all are welcome to join, but we're going to be out on the streets organizing and passing out condoms. And then we're going to be doing policy work, so join us if you want. Thanks, I don't need you to confer any legitimacy on me, I bring my own legitimacy.

And what happened was, they got really upset with that. They tried to get others at our organization, CURAS, to control what we were doing and really stop focusing on women and trans people, in terms of how we were spending money. And so, they came to our open house, and started screaming at us and making demands. And there were a whole bunch of men who came into the space, and they were really loud and threatening. And for me, and Diane Felix, who was my co-conspirator and community member, she served as one of my mentors too, also partner in crime with Rodrigo Reyes, we were really clear like this is the model. And we know why, and it's based in data, and it's based in love, and this is it. And you don't have to like it.

We know how liberation movement, how the civil rights movement, was built on the backs of women, and we know that the queer movement really was built on the backs of trans women. And we understood that as what we were doing, and so, when we were confronted with this misogyny and violent communication, one, first of all, my skills kick in in ways that are instinctive, really it's not like—I don't need to do talking points and prepare a speech, I'm just really able to, very quickly, figure out what is your argument, how do I destroy it, and again, do it in public so that it's really clear. And if you choose violence, it's going to be super clear that that's what you did.

And so that's what happened—they were trying to mansplain to us how we should be doing our work and how we were wrong. And we said, well no, this is our model, our model is inclusive and needs to include women. Women are getting AIDS and trans women need services, and that's not a part of these contracts, so we're making them a part of the contracts. And they said, well, you think you know everything about women, you know we know women too, and we

know trans people too, some of us even sleep with trans women and drag queens. And then I was like, okay, so here is the deal. You are not necessarily going to like what I'm going to say, but this is what I've got to say, just because you fuck one of us does not mean that you understand us, and it does not mean that you can speak for us. And then, all hell broke loose. And so, they were like, they wanted to physically fight us, and they started yelling, and it was an example of how power, and even people who are aspiring for power, will take us out, will try to take us out.

And it's not a figurative thing, like they will literally try to fight us physically, to take us out of the equation, and that I'm not afraid of that. If you think that's going to stop me in this work, you obviously don't know who I am and what I am a part of. I am a part of something much bigger than you, I am a part of something that has always existed. My right to this is in the land, it's in the water, it's in the stars, it's in the sky, it's because I'm fucking special, we've always been fucking special. If you don't like that, that's not my business. Just get out of the way. So, that for me, was an example how CURAS, we took up that space. And no, we did not change our programs. And eventually it became really clear to everybody in the community, oh, that group is the outlier. We are not the outlier. We are not the fringe. We are a part of this and there needs to be balance. So, I'm really happy about that.

It also meant that we were dying. So, at this time there was just so many people that were coming down with AIDS. And AIDS in 1990, '91, and '92, which is when CURAS was around, meant we were doing case management work. We got a contract with Shanti, where I became a case manager. I moved from admin assistant to case management, health education work. And part of my job was—there was a house in the Mission on Twenty-Fourth Street, with Latinos that

was owned by the Shanti Project, but they did not—thanks to our advocacy, they didn't have a contract to do actual social services for the people there, because they didn't have the cultural competency that we needed. And that's what we were fighting for in terms of policy. So, the contract actually came to CURAS for that case management work, and then I played that role. And there were like between four and six individuals living there, and I had two clients, in particular. One was gender queer, Latino, and another was a cis gender man from Peru, and all our clients really were Latino from other countries. And so, often, when they got sick, it meant that the work that we had to do was also family oriented, in terms of like we needed to case management for the entire family, not just the one person.

And it also meant that it was international, and that it included the legal logistics and financial logistics of like how does a family respond to one of their members being sick and dying of AIDS, and how does that actually happen. Like, how does the mother come from Peru, and where is she going to stay, we knew like there was Family Link was a place, there was another Catholic order, I think it's Sisters of Mercy, ran a house where we could—it's almost like underground stuff but none of it was secret, it was just you had to know the work. You had to know who to ask and have relationships with them. That's what the case management role was. So, I played that role.

Q: And what were some of the ways that the families from other countries responded to their loved one dying of AIDS?

Aguirre: It was really complicated. There were often unresolved issues. People coming from other countries, usually it was the same reasons why, say like I left San Diego at the time was because there were more opportunities, you could be yourself, you didn't have to fix other people's problems if their problems included—let's say their homophobia, transphobia or whatever, a lot of the people who came from other countries, Latinos, to San Francisco, usually it was because of gender and sexual orientation. And those were not fixed by them coming here, and they definitely were not fixed by them getting sick with AIDS. So, what happened was all of that would get into the mix right at the very end of a dying process. And it was tough.

It was tough, although I had gone multiple trainings, but one of them was with the Shanti Project, where there's two weekends of training. One was focused on emotional support, and boundaries and showing up and listening, and empathy versus offering sympathy, which is really not useful, whereas empathy is, active listening. And so, I applied that in this work, also there were many of us doing this work at the time, as case managers, and we had to take care of each other. And since I was a part of coalitions, and coalition building, I was also part of—there was a group that followed a third world AIDS advisory task force that Rodrigo and Hank Navara [*phonetic*] were a part of, and Benjina Benavidez [*phonetic*], they had gotten me into that community work that led to a gay men of color consortium, where we formed a coalition with Gay Asian Pacific Alliance, American Indian AIDS Institute, Black Coalition on AIDS, and us, the Latino Coalition on AIDS. And, we had really clear, kind of, protocols on how to respond to things on macro levels, and then how we worked with each other, and even staff. Because we were now all forming new organizations and responses, community responses, to AIDS, but AIDS was really just one of many things, poverty, and crack, and discrimination, and all of the traumas that have

impacted us. That we were the experts, versus like everybody else, let's say white AIDS movement building, really didn't have to deal with any of that stuff. At least not on the levels that we did.

So, we helped each other, even on the levels of service provision, and we would see each other at like Ward 86, when we would go see our clients who were dying of AIDS. And like, the nurses knew us, and even like Sandra Hernandez, who was the head of DPH had a residency, and still, to this day, I think has clients that she sees, some of whom survived from that time and remain as her patients. So, we know all of the work from the streets to cultural to creating the organizations, and then holding systems accountable. I think for me, doing that work, it meant how can I show up with humanity, and how can I show up as my full self as even an antidote to when families come and they were trying to play out and resolve very quickly stuff that really was not going to get resolved as part of the dying process. Like, there's not enough time. Like, what I've learned is if, let's say you've inflicted trauma on somebody for ten years, then the undoing of that is probably going to take an equal amount of time.

And it may never actually get undone. And so, for me, I'm not going to focus on that, necessarily, I'm going to focus on this is what needs to happen, this is how you're showing up for your child. Your child is a grown adult who is dying right now. Is this really what you want to focus on, your unresolved issues with your child before they die, you maybe have a few more weeks or months where you're going to be able to interact with them, is this how you really want use that time. You can count the hours that you have left. And for me, that is a major framing of how I look at life. Like, how much do I need to fix somebody, in terms of their transphobia. How

much do I need to fix them in terms of their internalized traumas? Not much is my answer. I think I need to develop policies and make sure that there are resources for my communities, and I need to work with other coalition members on what's needed for—they're the experts. That's my focus. Like, I'm going to focus on the people who I love and love me back, and the rest of it, you can get on board or not. And what I found was, if people are in tough places in that dying process, or a situation on where they're unsure on how to proceed, if you're honest with them and you're upfront. And you don't put a lot of fluff around it, and also maybe you're pretty and nice, then they will listen and it will resonate. And I could share examples of how a limited amount of time is important to use correctly before you lose that time.

Q: We all have limited time on this earth and I'm sitting with what you said just now, I'm going to focus on the people whom I love and who love me back, and that makes me think about chosen family, and the way that you have woven rich chosen family for your life. Could you speak to that experience and what it's meant for you, chosen family?

Aguirre: Yes. And also, I want to acknowledge that we maybe don't have too much more—we maybe have four minutes before the jets start flying by. So, in terms of chronology, what I want to share in chosen family, is that Teresita, Ronnie, Mahogany, Rodrigo, and Diane, and I were all part of a small chosen family that were part of a bigger, very big community and chosen family. But, like we in particular were the very tight, chosen family. And we supported each other and went to each other's shows. Diane was a DJ for Colors, which was a Latina lesbian club on Valencia at Amelia's, and was a DJ at Esta Noche at one point. And Rodrigo had done lots of community work on Sixteenth Street, especially for making space for transgender women, and

super buchas [butch], so I include in there maybe later some people who would might have transitioned to be trans men.

And what happened was some of us were starting to get sick, and some of us were starting to die, that AIDS had a delayed impact on us because it really was initially amongst gay, white men in San Francisco, and New York, and other metropolitan cities of the world. And when I got here, my friends were like, oh, a protective measure is don't have sex with white people. And that's how you'd get AIDS. And so, that was a thing on Sixteenth Street, we knew who slept with white people, and we were like, that person, if you sleep with them you're sleeping with their other partners, is what they used to say. And so, we'd be like okay, you need to be more careful.

For me, that was a thing because Robert, my first partner, was an Italian man who liked to go to Esta Noche, and I found out was HIV positive after I moved in. I didn't know that beforehand. We were safe, however I understood that that construct, which is kind of a stereotype, sometimes those stereotypes are out there because they're based in some kind of reality. And in my own case, that was the case where I was a young person of color dating a white man, Italian, who really looked Latino in many ways and was comfortable with Latinos but was not, and was eleven years older than me, and was HIV positive. So, that thing on the streets was a real thing. But it did get us after all. Like, one by one, many of us started to become infected.

I was trained as an HIV test counselor, so like, when people would go get tested, in those days, you'd have to wait two weeks and then go in person to get your results and I was one of them. And then later, when I worked at Mission neighborhood health center as the early intervention

clinic, and then with CURAS, I had lots of experience with not only actually doing the services, but setting up the programs. All of this is like before I'm twenty-five years old, so it's pretty crazy how that happened. But it makes sense in retrospect, that we just needed it and nobody really cared how old I was if I was going to do the work. And I could do it well. But what happened was, Gatun [*phonetic*] was one of the first drag trans performers on Sixteenth Street who passed away from AIDS. And Rodrigo, my mentor, got sick and had to retire from doing community work in like 1990. So, this is pretty early, I'd only been here three years and people were now starting to die around me. Which I knew was there, it was part of the impetus of me leaving Stanford, oh there's something happening in our community, I need to be a part of the response now. Like, I could come back to school. Which I did eventually do, by the way. And I could share more on that later, but I did that thirteen years after I left, or maybe more. Yes.

Anyway, Rodrigo got sick, and when Rodrigo got sick, that was around '90, '91, was when he started to be open about it. And him being a part of an older generation of queer and trans people, who are really private about our health and what we were experiencing, meant that he led basically two lives. And the one was the life in the Mission, where he was a board member of Mission neighborhood centers, and then was the Executive Director of Mission Cultural Center, and a grant writer and a playwright and made videos and was a poet. Like, me, I followed in his footsteps in all of those things. Except I didn't make plays, but I did produce an opera on Juana Inez de la Cruz, so I have produced arts festivals. Actually, I very much followed in his steps. And when he got sick, I was a part of his care team, and there were like six of us who we had time slots where we would take care of him, and go to his house, and all of this was happening—there was also a period where CURAS was having great difficulties managing a great influx of

funds without infrastructure building, and many attacks from within the community and from outside the community.

As a result, there was great turmoil in all levels of our community. There was lots of death, there was lots of attacks, emotional and political attacks. And when Rodrigo got sick, and being a part of that, and me being a case manager, I got burnt out, and I'm happy that I was a part of all of that. But, by 1992 I was already like oh, I can't do this. Like I'm not meant to be a direct service provider, it's too much. It was all about death and dying, really, at that time, and it was too much. It got to be too much. So, I got burnt out on that and decided I needed to leave CURAS, and also the organization was going through many problems, and I just thought, you know what, this is all too much, like I've given my blood, sweat and tears to this place. I had helped build it up by writing grants and getting new programs, stuff that I just kind of do automatically at that point and throughout, I just kind of do that in my sleep, kind of thing. But what I learned was, oh, doing direct services on top of that is too much. And I need some distance from all of this, and that I have to take care of myself. I have to repair myself and this grief that I have, it's much bigger than I'm able to hold.

And so, I decided to leave, and the organization, eventually after a few years, imploded. There were some issues with some funds from one contract—we ended up getting the Shanti House as a contract, and then but the Executive Director, because of cash flow problems that are structural—DPH uses a reimbursement, the city of San Francisco uses a reimbursement process. We never had unrestricted funds to cover cash flow. Because of that, the leadership of that organization used funds for one contract for other purpose, and that's illegal. And so, the

organization imploded. For me, it ended that period, even though it was brief, it was a really impactful period of me helping to work within my community, but also amongst other people of color communities, there was a sex worker community, especially in the TL, and there was the trans community that was kind of everywhere, and how I was a part of us all coming together. And that I knew that I needed to step out of, at least the direct services, and as a result of that, I also needed to make sense of all of this.

And I understood with Rodrigo's passing, what happened was I had done a six-hour oral history with Rodrigo. And I had been a journalist and I would write for the San Francisco Sentinel, it was a gay paper here. My beat was AIDS and gay people of color, I had a column that was called "Painting the Town" and that was like people of color events and culture. And what I found is that journalism had its limits, poetry had its limit, I would do readings at Modern Times Bookstore, and with Rodrigo and Francisco Arconne [*phonetic*], and Juan Pablo Gutierrez, and lots of other great writers, and even that was fruitful and awesome and fun, but also very limited to who was there. Which, though I love live performance or cultural presentations, there wasn't a means for it to be preserved. And with people dying, I thought I needed that.

So, oral history was a way for me to try to preserve that, but what I found was oh, it's not going to get to enough people. And so, I decided I would get into movies. Actually, how that happened was a little bit more than that. I became friends with Osa Hidalgo de Riva, Lola de Riva was her mother, they're both lesbians and cultural producers, artists, video makers, poets, Osa's a poet, and so, Osa was my peer in poetry and artwork, and she wanted me to intern with her on her documentary project called "Me and Mr. Mowdy" first as a grant writer, and then in terms of

learning how to make movies, and so, I did work with her. And then I interned with Mary Guzman on her movie, oh my goodness, “Desi’s Looking for a New Girl” was a movie that Mary Guzman did, she’s a Chicana lesbian filmmaker. And I also interned with like Electric City, which was a public access cable queer and trans program, and I started to learn how to make movies. And yes, when we come back, if you want we can talk about Cholo Hoto and how that led to Viva Sixteenth.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center      Session Number: 2

Narrator: Tina Valentin Aguirre      Location: San Francisco, CA

Interviewer: Caro De Robertis      Date: December 6, 2022

Q: Okay. So Tina [Aguirre], can you tell us about *Cholo Joto* and how that led to *Viva 16*?

Aguirre: Yes. Let's see. I was in a writing group through, I think, Proyecto Contra SIDA Por Vida. It might have preceded the formation of Proyecto [Contra SIDA Por Vida] by a little bit. That Ricardo [A.] Bracho had organized some writing groups, and there was one that I was in called The Rites of Mourning [*phonetic*], and in there, I met many great writers and artists, and one of them was Augie Robles. Augie—I think he may have approached me before I was in the writing group, or it was after. I forget the sequence. They happened very closely in time around 1991, I think, '92.

And he asked me if I wanted to be in his movie, a short. He was taking a class, I think at state, and one of his projects was to make a movie, so he made *Cholo Joto*. Ricardo Bracho was in that short. Myself and Michelangelo [*phonetic*—I forget his last name. Oh my goodness. And when we started the project, what I had told Augie was, “I'm okay with this, though I know how editing and production can really change stories and narratives, so I'm agreeing to this as long as I have a right to approve the edit.” And he agreed to that, and I had him sign something to that effect, and then, he edited the movie without me, and then I wasn't really happy with the product. Mind you, it was actually a good short video. It's more just that, because I had made so much content previously, that I was really clear on, like, that as a thing in terms of that specific

collaboration. And I didn't really know where Augie was coming from because we were so new to each other. I really thought that I needed that as a part of the agreement. When it came out, I let him know that I wasn't happy with it. When I look back at it now, I think, okay, I'm really happy that it exists. However, it's a very masculine-centered short, even though I'm wearing lipstick in it, but it really is about masculinity in the *joto* context. At least, that's my take, kind of.

So I let him know that I wasn't going to, like, stop him from showing it or anything. More I just let him know, and whenever it came up, let's say we were in a panel together, I would just share. Like, yes, that's not really what I had wanted, and so, what I told him was, "It's okay. I'm going to make my own movie." And I had started interning with Osa Hidalgo de la Riva on her movie, *Me and Mr. Mauri*. She got her PhD at USC [University of Southern California]. She's from the Bay Area. I met her with Lola de la Riva—older. Her mom was a lesbian artist. Visual artist. She and her mom and siblings are a family of artists I met very quickly when I got to San Francisco. So I interned with Osa [Hidalgo de la Riva]. I also interned on a movie that was *Desi's Looking for New Girl* by Mary—I forget her last name, too. And I was also interning at different places to learn about how to produce movies, so I decided that I would shoot *Viva 16* about the people that I love and care for, and that it would include much more complexity around gender and how we build hope despite so many challenges.

And so what happened was I told Augie, "Oh, yes, it's okay. I'm going to do this project," and then, he asked me if he could work with me, and I said, "Sure, as long as we're both directors. We're both the editors. We do it together completely." That's how that came about.

Q: And can you talk about the content of the film *Viva 16*?

Aguirre: Yes. Before starting *Viva 16*, I had worked with Rodrigo Reyes and lots of local poets and writers doing a lot of events at, like, Modern Times Bookstore, a lot of readings. And a lot of them were political in nature, and what I learned was finding community through art was really important to me. I also was a writer and in journalism. I was a reporter. I'd done a story on Creativity Explored for an alternative magazine here in San Francisco called *Verses* in 1987, and that's how I met Ester Hernandez. Ester Hernandez worked at Creativity Explored for quite some time and is a great artist. Lesbian, Latina. She also was just in the community. Like, in the bars, hanging out. But I really got to talk with her at length there, and then, when—she knew Rodrigo and a lot of my friends, a lot of my chosen family members. She encouraged me, along with Rodrigo, to do an oral history on Rodrigo because his story was really important.

What I found, though, was through journalism, and poetry, and oral histories is that there's such a limited audience for who's able to actually access the materials, and I really wanted a movie instead. I thought a movie also can—you can kind of hit play, and you can speak before if you want, maybe, if it's part of an event, but what I envisioned was collecting a lot of stories, a lot of people's stories, through interviews, and then events, recording events, and putting it together to tell the story of how the community came together in San Francisco, how LGBTQ Latinx people came together, especially on Sixteenth Street, and also how it was at risk for being lost. Lost because of displacement and gentrification. When I got here, there were many bars where we

could all meet and hang out. There were also stores, bookstores, where community events could happen. One by one, they started to close.

Q: Do you remember the names of any of the bookstores that were gathering places?

Aguirre: Modern Times Bookstore was probably the biggest one. I think there were some on Twenty-Fourth Street also, and some cafes. So Café Macondo was a big one. And then, on Sixteenth Street, what is Picaro now also was, like, a café. So there were many places where we did readings and events. The Victoria [Theater] was also really big because, once a year, there were the Prisma Awards that Rodrigo produced with people who had been in the gala and people who were with Guras [*phonetic*]. Guras—HIV organization. And so, those were really fun cultural events that were happening. Mission Cultural Center [for Latino Arts] and Galería de la Raza had a lot of events, too.

So, yes, we started to—I had an outline of what I wanted to tell beforehand, and then, I interviewed lots of people and along the way was starting to feel better about at least having documentation of many people that I thought were at risk for dying, really. Like, cancer, crack, poverty, hopelessness, and AIDS were all impacting us in very real ways. There were many of the issues that we're looking at today that are pretty obvious in terms of mental health, and needs, and isolation. So it really was a way for me to introduce to Augie, and then to lots of other people, how special we are, how special we were in that particular time, and I'm really happy about that.

Q: Yes, it's incredible. And what did it mean to you then to create *Viva 16*, and what does it mean to you now?

Aguirre: It meant a lot. There were many ways that it was impactful for me. *Viva 16* was also a break from doing AIDS work, so direct service and advocacy work. I really was so burnt out that I made a conscious decision to not do that for a while. I supported myself doing, like, temp office work, and then, just throwing myself into the production of recording, and then editing, and then showing the movie over a number of years. I also accessed footage from a couple friends of mine.

One in particular was Ana Bertha Campa [*phonetic*], who is a videographer who collected lots and lots of footage from the early '80s, and she gave me access to them for this movie. So some footage, thankfully, is from Ana Bertha's point of view. What it meant for me was a shift away from a hopelessness and, like, uncertainty of the future to, at least, this is where we're at right now. And, often, coming up with, let's say, telling a story of, hey, we might lose this, or hey, this is where we're headed if we're not careful, it, at the time, was kind of fear based propaganda. Like, fear-based propaganda against using crack, against sex, against so much, really, out of the '80s and the early '90s. That really was just kind of, like, amongst us in a really big way, and so, I wanted to center these issues, but not in a way that was fear based.

It really was more, like, this is who we are. We're special, and here's a little tiny bit about where we're headed and how our conflicts are—we do have conflicts and differences. That doesn't mean, though, that there's no hope. There's a lot of resilience, and amongst ourselves as

subgroups, trans women, let's say darker Latinx people, lighter-skinned Latinx people, immigrants, people who are from San Francisco, Chicano, and otherwise, like, we have a lot of differences. We also have a lot of commonalities, and in the movie, I put that together. Augie was really great to bring some technical component to it in terms of great camera work and editing. And, for me, it helped shift away from sort of rasquachismo in some of the art that was being created locally to—

Q: Can you define rasquache?

Aguirre: Yes, rasquache is part of a tradition of putting on art and putting on a show with whatever you have, and that's awesome. And I believe in fine art, and I think all of it is necessary, but art as propaganda as it's come out through so many different ways, but it—let's say the civil rights movement in particular is awesome, but also, it leaves me a little weary. So the idea of building mythologies, the idea of Aslan [phonetic], the idea of, like, origins are really good for educational and sociopolitical purposes. I find them very limiting in terms of grandeur of art. In terms of art. So, like, Diego Rivera is a great example of how that propagandistic kind of art uses people, like proletariats, and women, and children, and workers in ways that I think, oh, I don't know that—I don't like that. I just find it very uninteresting.

For me, I think, on the other hand, Frida Kahlo is fine art, where it's complex. A lot of it is internal, maybe on the surface could seem flat, or, like in her case, was really focused on her experience, but it really was that she was such a complex character and going through so much that there were universalities that come out through her art. So for me, I craved art for us that

was more complex and also allows people to piece together their own narrative. So there's not a narrator for *Viva 16*. I mean, for me, I see myself as a narrator by creating it, and putting in the people that are in the movie, and choosing the pieces. However, there are lapses, or there's moments where it's not clear how we're going from one place to the other, and that's intentional. I want people to kind of struggle with that and find the next place. Or maybe not. Like, it's okay if not everybody has the same experience.

Q: And so, now, with your years as an artist and activist, what have you learned about the role of art in liberation movements? [*Pauses*] You've certainly already been speaking to it, but if there's anything else that rises up for you.

Aguirre: For me, it's about hope and love, that without hope and love, a revolution, or let's say social movement, social justice, is bereft of soul, of humanity, and fine art, in particular, is a way to do that in a way that doesn't really make sense. It's not exactly rational, the experience of engaging with something that may be really complex, and moving, and not obvious. For me, what I take away is, oh, we can do that. We need that.

I grew up in San Diego near Chicano Park, with murals in Chicano Park. Some of them were ugly. Some, I learned very quickly, like, okay, there's ugly art, there's okay art, there's some great art. And each of those had value. Like, there was a really ugly part of a mural that had a literal depiction of one of my tías [aunts] in Chicano Park, and it was really, really ugly, and [*laughs*] all I could think is, oh my God, she's so much prettier than that. And you tried your best, and, well, there's my tía [aunt].

But what I also took away when they painted over it, and they put up a better mural, was, ah, okay. I know what was there. If there was value to it to us who knew what was there at the time and then it's gone, it's okay. For me, though, I privilege great art, and I encourage that in others. I think life is so short. Like, who has time for shitty art? What is that doing for us? Practice. Learn your stuff. Do it. And then, make some mistakes, but maybe not everything has to get shared. Ultimately, I want people to be moved, and I want to feel good as an artist. Not that everything is going to be great, but I can try.

Q: Yes. And you spoke about regeneration through the arts and what it meant to you at a time of burnout. What have you learned about resilience and how to be resilient, especially for queer and trans people of color?

Aguirre: I've learned that we live in cycles of upheavals and progress, and that regeneration is a big part of it. I participated in a multi-year project at Galería de la Raza after *Viva 16*, and they were going through a massive upheaval, and the regeneration project brought in new energy into Galería [de la Raza] at the time. And, for me, I acknowledge having met, let's say, like, Lola de la Riva and people in San Diego, people in LA itself helped graphics that all of us in the communities, we are doing community art for social justice, and let's say my generation is building on what was before us, before me. And some of that does mean, like, taking down our icons or, let's say, moving past what people will consider as iconic, and building new languages kind of through art.

What I thought here, at the time, was, oh, we don't have, really, the vocabulary for everything. We don't even have the representations. Like, what is in *Viva 16* was not anywhere else. There weren't depictions of us telling our own stories in terms of gender and race, and Sixteenth Street—so I'm really, really happy about that, and it's become really appreciated. It's an odd thing to have created this because it was really about the moment, and capturing the moment, and then sharing it. And we did have hopes around, like, what it might do, how it might land on people, but it was more like how it might land on people in a year or two. And after that, we didn't really think anything of it. And now, in retrospect, I understand, oh, no, this is actually much bigger than that, and that some of the challenges faced in making it—I'm really happy about embracing those challenges.

Like, Augie really wanted it to be more, like, show based and drag based, and focused on especially more men, and for me, I was really clear at the beginning, and it really did take us having strong discussions about it and me having to fight for the vision. So I'm really happy about that. At one point, Augie had said that he wanted to be the only editor, and he wanted to change some things, and I had to tell him, like, no, the whole project will fall apart if I take away my pieces, so that's not what's going to happen. I already learned through *Cholo Joto*, which is why we're making this.

So I also learned, in that process, is to work on projects, and it's okay if a project may be—and a partner in a project is not completely on board with the concept throughout the entirety of the project. I think what somebody says at the beginning of a project, it's not going to be the same in the middle, and maybe at the end, and I'm okay with that. Like, the project is important. The

partnership is important, or the collaboration is important, but it's not forever, and my take is, oh, I have lots of projects that I need to do. I'm never going to complete all of the projects that I want to do. I'm never going to be able to work with everybody I want to work with. It's okay if this particular partnership with this artist or this person works, or maybe even doesn't work, and then I maybe work with other artists or other people.

Q: Yes. Yes, thank you. In talking about some of the places that were havens for community and then were sort of lost with change and gentrification, one of the places we talked about in our last interview session was Esta Noche, which is now closed, and which was one really important place, right? I'm wondering if you could reflect on what Esta Noche meant to the Latinx queer communities and what that shift has meant.

Aguirre: Esta Noche was really important to us, and it really was only one of many places. So when I think of that time, I also think of Colors that was a Latina lesbian night that was at least once a month, maybe every two weeks at Emilia's [*phonetic*], which a lesbian bar on Valencia near Seventeenth. And there were other bars on Sixteenth Street and Valencia where we hung out, so there was Eagle Creek [Saloon] at Sixteenth and Guerrero. That's another bar now. And then there was La India Bonita; that was very close to Esta Noche. And then there was Noa Noa—or El Taurino was in between Esta Noche and La India Bonita. I think it's an Afghanistan restaurant right now. So, at one point, Los Portal—it was also called Los Portales. So at one point, there were three queer Latinx bars just on that half block between Esta Noche and the corner of Sixteenth and Valencia, and then, El Tin Tan right next to it was a bar where men who have sex with men would go.

So, like, it was really easy for, let's say, a trans person or a drag queen to say, "I'm going to go over here for something else," and hang out. For me, what it meant was there were lots of families, lots of us as families, where we had roommates, we had lovers, we had best friends and sisters, where we lived, and worked, and had fun on Sixteenth Street. So for me, *Esta Noche* and *La India Bonita* especially were the ones that really brought that out through music, and parties, and also times when we were really sad because when somebody was sick or dying, there might be a benefit before they died so that they could have some money, let's say, or there might be many benefits for let's say somebody who we knew was sick and wasn't able to pay their rent, wasn't able to bring their family from wherever they're from. Maybe they're not from here. And so it was really important for us to be able to come together and share that love when we're alive, and then if somebody passed also to mark that in the bars.

There was also, like, a zine at one point called *La Boca*. So somebody had created their own little monthly zine, and it was anonymous. I didn't have the name—I knew who the person was. It was Ray [*phonetic*]. But Ray would write all of this—a gossip sheet, basically, about Sixteenth and Valencia, and it was a lot of drama in that. Like, if Rosa [*phonetic*] the bartender broke up with her girlfriend, what was going to happen next? It was a lot of intrigue, and so, for me, it was also, like, a way of us—I don't know. Just living, doing, living all of our lives on Sixteenth street in ways that are much more than just, like, going to a bar.

Yes, it also was—there was danger involved at the time with crack and violence, homophobic and transphobic violence, and HIV and just the scare, how scary it was at the time. So it's almost

like the more danger that was coming from outside, the more we valued how much it meant to be safe and happy inside. Literally, like, the crack epidemic at Valencia Gardens—it's only a few blocks away, and so, there really was a lot of that happening.

Q: Can you speak to what Valencia Gardens was?

Aguirre: Yes. Valencia Gardens is a public housing facility. At the time, it was a housing project. So, literally, the housing projects that came out of—I don't know. The '50s and '60s maybe. They looked like war kind of barracks, where, like, they were buildings that were made out of concrete that were really sad. The areas for these housing projects were really sad, and scary, and bleak. Since then, it's been redeveloped to where they're apartment buildings, but it is still literally low-income housing. It's low-income housing. It's sort of like Alemany [phonetic]. There are a number of housing projects in San Francisco that remain, and that was one. And crack was so very big in the Valencia projects that it just meant the whole area because that's between Fourteenth and Fifteenth on Valencia, is where the housing project is.

Q: And could you speak more about the homophobic and transphobic violence that did impact the communities that were living and loving on Sixteenth Street?

Aguirre: It's really complicated. Most of it is, like, what you would say is kind of like stereotypical violence that you would think of. Some of it came from how there were, amongst us, people who were questioning their sexual orientation or their gender identity and had not worked it all out. And let's say, because of poverty, and crack, and all the systemic issues, might,

at one point, let's say, fall in love with a transgender woman and then beat her after work or cheat and do things that were really awful.

Somebody who I remember is Cindy Liu [*phonetic*]*—*where I lived, right on the corner, is Landers. It's a little side street. When I moved in here, she was already living on Landers, so less than half a block from where I live. And she was a trans Latina drag performer at La India Bonita. Cindy Liu. She did Cyndi Lauper songs. That's how she got her name. And she was really pretty, and nice, and she worked at the bar sometimes as a bartender but mostly as a performer.

And she had this really hot cholo boyfriend for a few years, but he was struggling with his identity, and she was unhappy a lot of the times. And, I have to say, I don't know that it was easy for him, being—like, he really was a cholo and straight. At the time, there was not the vocabulary to say, okay, you could still be—obviously you're straight. She's a trans woman. At the time, that was—unless you had an operation—let's say many operations, you couldn't say you were a trans woman, and so he—

Q: Like, even within the community, that wasn't sort of accepted—I'm a woman—if you were not post-op, right?

Aguirre: Yes. And so, that was a struggle that they had within their own relationship, I think. We knew because we would talk amongst ourselves, right? Like, me, Mahogany [*phonetic*], Ronnie [*phonetic*], and Teresita [*phonetic*], we all were close with Cindy. And it just got really bad,

where he cheated on her. He would sometimes taunt her. There are a lot of us working out our stuff and how it plays out. Sometimes it can be really bad. And she ended up deciding to kill herself on Valentine's Day. I think it was in '89, where she just went to the top of her building and jumped, and I think, oh, that's a time where, for us, it was really awful because we couldn't help her. We were not able to help prevent that. We did try, and, like, Ronnie had—all of us have had partners that were working out stuff, and we were working out stuff ourselves. Like, we were young, in our early twenties. And so, for me, it meant we could come together. We could love each other. But at the same time, we were going through a lot of challenges from outside the community and even inside.

Q: Thank you so much for sharing that deeply tragic, also moving and important story about Cindy Liu.

Aguirre: I'm happy to remember Cindy Liu. Cindy Liu was awesome and one of us, and one thing that I had started in a writing group was a short movie or a screenplay called *Heart of Glass*, where I had a character, Violeta [*phonetic*]. Her name was going to be Violeta instead of Cindy Liu. And, yes, I think what I learned was, okay, I wasn't able to get that off of the ground, but I could do *Viva 16*, and hurry up and get whatever I could, and put it out, and then see what else I could do.

Q: That's beautiful. That screenplay would be a real tribute to her, and this telling is also a real tribute to her that doubtlessly will mean a great deal to many people.

Aguirre: I also wanted to change the ending. Or I wanted to have at least two or three endings because I think we don't have enough multiple choices. Often, we don't have enough of our own autonomy in how our stories end up, even. And so, for me, at the time, I had to know that there are different endings. There are different possibilities, even if I have to write them and they're fiction.

Q: Is there anything more you would like to say in terms of speaking to violence, transphobic or homophobic violence, whether internalized within the community or from outside in those times?

Aguirre: I think what I learned from Rodrigo and people in the generation before me was that how that manifested was sometimes having multiple identities, and in the case of Rodrigo and another mentor of mine, Chris Sandoval [*phonetic*], who's in *Viva 16*, they had multiple identities in terms of, like, in the daytime, this work that was done in the community, boards of directors, or as executive directors, or leaders, and then, at night, in terms of sex, and drugs, and what happens in the bars.

And to say that what happened in the bars was very different than what happens in the bars today. So, let's say, on Sixteenth Street, there wasn't sex in the bars, but there were areas where, definitely, there was a lot of sex. Like, in the parking lot next to *Esta Noche* or around. And also, there were bars, and bathhouses, and sex clubs for everybody. So there was a lesbian bathhouse that was super private that was on Valencia, but it wasn't really well known, and people were not supposed to talk about it. But there were also—

Q: Not Osento?

Aguirre: I think, maybe, that was it.

Q: Maybe Osento?

Aguirre: Yes. I forget the name because I just know of it. And then, there were lots of bars south of Market where you could have sex in the bars and sex clubs. So all of that was happening. Yes, I don't know. I think, for me, what I was trying to make sense of is, like, this is full. This is complex. This life is—we're able to do all of it, and some of us are getting lost in some of these things. Like, we're losing ourselves, or, let's say, if we experience violence perpetrated against us, as a community or as individuals, that is was hard to bounce back, and add to that AIDS and cancer, and there's a hopelessness, I think, that could grow, even as we were just kind of trying to have fun and come together on Sixteenth Street.

So I looked to art as ways to come up with a different way of how we could live instead of having multiple identities and instead of having stuff inside these spaces really was, how can we just put it out in the open? Like, I really thought our stuff needed to be in museums, in galleries, in the bars, and in theaters, and in different places. There was nothing wrong with what we're doing. It's not that we had to be behind the scenes or in private. We're not bad. We're just humans.

Q: Yes. You mentioned families, families within the community on Sixteenth Street, and in the last session, you also spoke to chosen family. Is there more that you may want to say about what chosen family has meant to you over time?

Aguirre: Yes. Well, I will share that I did experience burnout, and after *Viva 16* came out, which I'm really happy about. I did do a short on Teresita, la Campesina that came out in 1996 as part of the first Tranny Fest at the Roxie Theater. I'm really happy about that. And a lot of my friends were sick. So, let's say, some friends had long-term illnesses.

One of my friends, Virginia Benevides [*phonetic*], was a photographer who was a part of gala, and some of her photos are in *Viva 16*. So the photos of gala in the '70s are her photos. They're awesome, great, beautiful photos. She was a great photographer. She had done photos on Adela [*phonetic*], and those are great photos. That was his own show that she did at Galería. She and I were partners in crime, and I knew that she had Hep C, or she had hepatitis and was challenged by this, and this was part of our community. Like, when I asked her, "How did this happen? How did you get hepatitis?"—which, really, we shouldn't ask. It's not my business. But we're close, and we talked, and she said, "Oh, yes, no, I used to inject drugs in the '70s, and, like, with queers and people who"—and so, she ended up getting hepatitis. It's good that she didn't get HIV as a result of that. And so, what I was learning—and Rodrigo died. I knew Virginia had hepatitis, and cancer was affecting some of us. I went through a tough time between, like, '97 and 1999.

I also had some other friends—one of my friends, Alfredo Armendariz [*phonetic*] worked with me at Guras in the early '90s, had gotten really sick. And Alfredo was a great artist, a painter, a

sculptor, a leather man who did leather stuff as art, kind of. Like, these racks and knots. He was a wizard. A master, I guess, is a better word. And he got really sick in 1999, and it really was, for me, a low point because we were struggling. Both of us were artists, but we had done HIV work, community work, and at some point, I just was so sad—and Teresita had gotten sick, too—that I needed to take myself out of this super level of grief that I was experiencing.

I decided that I needed to go back to school to finish my degree. I also had some health issues and, I couldn't survive on doing temp work anymore, and part of a settlement that I did, because it was a work-related injury, was to go back to Stanford [University], which was an anomaly, was really hard to get that as the outcome, but I did. I went back, and in 1999 or 2000, finished most of my coursework, came back, and then started working with a queer Latino artist coalition, and that started—before then, though, I will share that Proyecto was around and happening, and when I tried to plug back into it, I realized most of my sisters, my family, had dispersed. We had all had a rough go of it. And my cohort really were in different places, and so, when I came back looking for family, I didn't find it.

Instead, what I did was learn the value of creating new chosen family pods. I don't know. More like I accept—what I bring to situations and places is an energy where I can easily connect with people, and I can engage and build community, and maybe love on a small level that's just kind of community based. And so, for a short time, what I shared with the group that—I was in a new writing group. I think I might have led that group. I forget. I was like, okay, I'm going to do a spell. I did a piece as a spell, and we held hands, and I said the poem, and what I said was, “For this moment, you are my family. I need family. We all need family. This is the spell.” And what

I took away from that was I can do that wherever I am, whenever I am, and that I need that. I need to be able to continually make connections, keep connections. It's okay if some of these connections don't stay. They're not permanent. That's not the point. I can't control that. I can't control so much. What I can control is that I hope to connect, and I can connect, and that I can enjoy that connection.

So I did that, and then, with Celaco [*phonetic*], a queer Latino artist coalition, I embraced doing art again, and Virginia was on the board of directors, and Virginia always had a strong affinity for trans women. And what I would say now is, probably, she would identify as nonbinary, but it's kind of hard, in retrospect, to say these things. She was a butch dyke, no doubt about it. She was a butch dyke, was really connected to her indigenous roots, and she loved Teresita, La Campesina. Like, her and Ester or me, we were just all part of the family, although there was some sexual tension there, so there's something else going on there, too. Like, where that's just a thing before pansexual or, like, what the children are saying now. At the time, it was just more like, there's some people who are more open. And so a lot of the artists that I connected with are much more open that way.

Q: So where was the sexual tension? Between Virginia and Teresita?

Aguirre: Yes. Yes. And Ester and Teresita. And me, and us, and, like, it was just a thing. Yes. Things are not always clear cut.

And so what I did with queer Latino artists coalition was—first, I was on the board, and then I became their staff, and I did a number of festivals. So each year, we did an arts festival, part of the Queer Cultural Center’s National Queer Arts Festival. And we did one art show, a visual art exhibition, at SOMArts [Cultural Center], in the large space that was called TRANSitions, Transiciones, and that really was—it featured art by Ester on Teresita, la Campesina after she had passed. There was another show another year that was called Ungodly Bodies, where un was in parentheses, and it was about how, you know, religion, and its impact on us, and how we are sacred and profane at the same time.

Along the way, I was working with Virginia, and Ester, and Jaime Cortez [*phonetic*], and other artists, and trying to elevate what was getting put out there. There was a shift from before my time to me in leadership in the arts where I started to do much more curation and auditioning of talent, so, like, there was a spoken word component. There were plays. There were all kinds of arts that were part of the festival, and what I brought to it was, let’s institute some standards here. They are subjective, and I’m going to lead this. [*Laughs*] So this is—come along. I know what you think happened in the past was good, but let’s make it better. And along the way, I really found new hope for myself and artists in the community.

I also met Carla Lucero [*phonetic*], who liked my vision and hired me as a producer for her opera on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz called *Juana*—a seventeenth-century nun. I would say she’s a lesbian and one of the greatest poets of the world ever. And her opera—mind you, I didn’t know opera, but when we met and she said, “I have this project. Juana is the main character. El Alma is another character.” El Alma is a third gender person representation of godly art. I don’t know. A

muse. The muse of—she's called the tenth muse of the world, and this character in her opera represented how it's beyond gender. She, and her art, and the muse were beyond gender. So I thought, oh, that's interesting. And, of course, Juana's interesting, and Carla herself is a great composer. She worked with Alicia Gaspar de Alba on the libretto. Both of them are the co-librettists. And I liked Alicia's work as a Chicana lesbian writer.

Q: Who, herself, is the author of a novel about Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

Aguirre: Yes. Yes. So, the opera is based in some—

Q: Right. *Sor Juana's Second Dream*, I think it's called.

Aguirre: Yes, it plays a major role, or it greatly informs the Juana opera. And so part of my work with Celaco morphed into me becoming an opera producer and learning about opera, and to do that, I thought, oh, I really need to learn about opera, and so, I started to volunteer with the San Francisco Opera in their store, where, every time I would volunteer, it was during an opera, I would get free tickets to the shows in the orchestra level. So over a period of, like, three years, I basically—three or four years—when the Juana opera was getting made and workshopped, I was also learning about opera, which was really good because the initial phases of Juana were readings that were not operatic. They were just really working on the libretto, and we had, like, a couple of scenes or events that just were working out the dramaturgy of the piece.

And I got to go with Carla and the opera to Mexico City. Carla is a leader amongst Latina artists, and there's a colectiva de mujeres en el arte, ComuArte [women's art collective] that's international but has a strong presence in Mexico and Spain, and it's Latinx women. We presented workshopped iterations of Juana at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, and it reinforced, for me, that we deserve fine art because there are many places in the world where it's not white because, one, it's, like, Mexico. Let's say it's pretty easy to say, oh, that's not a white thing. Everybody's Mexican. I mean, there is whiteness and color, of course, but to say that Mexicans don't have—like, the way I grew up, that was the construct. Oh, like, opera or fine art would be white, for white people. That's not true. If you go to the Palacio de Bellas Artes, a lot of the times, on the weekends, they just have free symphony or free opera, and that's how our events were shown, even. And, of course, there's visual arts, and then, we would have conferences where we would talk about and fight about art, and so, for me, I loved, loved, loved this stuff.

And so that's one of the things that I'm most proud of, is the Juana opera and how, in 2007, we had a staged workshop production of, like, two-thirds or three-fourths of the completed opera at Theater Artaud [*phonetic*] over a weekend. Sold out crowds. It was amazing, and it was a culmination of the work. And then, in 2018 or 2019, the opera—after that, unfortunately, there was the dot-com boom, and so being able to get funds to finalize it, it was stalled, but I'm happy to share that Carla and Alicia worked with UCLA to mount a full production of the opera in, I think, 2018 that I went to, and it was amazing.

Q: That sounds amazing.

Aguirre: I forget how we were getting there—

Q: What was it? Well, we started with chosen family, but, you know, all of—I see the connections in the strands of your telling between, you know, the art making and the family making. I mean, they're connected for you. What was it like? What did it feel like in your body, in your consciousness, to go and see this opera staged in 2018?

Aguirre: One, I was happy that we're still alive, because I don't take that for granted, and I don't mean that in a bad way. Like, I'm really, really happy that Alicia, Carla, myself, Tracy Ward [*phonetic*] is the fabulous director. I had the complete privilege to work with Tracy Ward, who still directs great plays and musicals. She'd recently directed *Fun Home with Forty-Second Street Moon*, which was awesome. So that was last year, I think. I loved it. I love Alicia, and this was a reunion for us, and it was a culmination of that. It got a stellar review in the LA Times, and, for me, it's almost like it's a dream that this opera happened, and it's ephemeral, because you had to be there. Like, really, that's the nature of opera.

And so it does put me back to a time where I'm like, oh, it's not a movie. I can't show it. Oh my God. Not everybody's going to see it. However, there's something about it having been produced, and now, I understand opera. Like, once an opera is fully produced, it'll have its own life, much in the same way like *Viva 16* has its own life. Like, it pops up in ways that still surprise me, and I have a lot of faith that the Juana opera will have, hopefully, a long and varied life. It's great art, so I'm really happy about that.

Q: And alongside these beautiful years of art making, you've continued to be an activist as well, and I'm wondering if you could speak to your work with the GLBT Historical Society and what that's meant to you.

Aguirre: Yes, thank you. That is interesting because, a lot of times when I've stepped into leadership, it's because I thought I really had to do it, that there was a choice where I didn't really have to do it, but I knew if, maybe, I didn't, or somebody like me didn't step up, that there's a negative outcome. In this case, the Historical Society was in dire straits—financial straits. Their executive director had left, many of the donors stopped giving, and it was at risk for shutting down.

And I had met Gerard Koskovich [*phonetic*] and Daniel Bow [*phonetic*] when I went to Stanford in 1986. I met them when I walked into the Gay [and] Lesbian Alliance at Stanford. It's a firehouse. And, like, right when I walked in, there was this group of people that were like, "Hey, who are you and what do you do?" And I've just remained connected with them. And, even at that time, in 1986 they were like, "Hey, we're creating this GLBT Historical Society and this is what we want to do. Are you interested?" And I was like, hey, I'm just a student. [*Laughs*] Like, what are you talking about? And they're persistent, consistent, about trying to connect me, and we've all known each other and kept up with each other. At one point, another person in that group was Carl Canaparo [*phonetic*], who became the president of the Frameline board of directors, and because I was in several Frameline festivals, we remained connected.

And so, throughout a long period, many people were saying, “Hey, you should join the board of directors of the Historical Society, or you should be on their staff,” and I’d be like, yeah, no. At one point in 1999 or 2000, Virginia and I were approached by the Historical Society to do a project called Making a Case [for Community History], and it was a literal case out of plexiglass that was, like, five or six of them were created to decentralize representations and to seek out ephemera and many exhibitions or installations on communities that were underrepresented in the museum. So Virginia and I, because we had curated so many shows, they said, “Hey, we’ll give you a case,” and we made an altar [altar]. And it was a really fabulous altar to the ’70s, ’80s, and people that we loved, people that we lost, and so that was the first time I literally collaborated with the Historical Society. It was really fun. It was awesome.

And what happened was, when I got a call from Gerard and a few others to say, “Hey, the Historical Society is going through a rough time. Would you consider stepping up?” I thought, okay. The other times, it was more like, you’re just inviting me, and I’m busy, and I have all these other things that are higher priority, but when this happened, I realized, oh, we’re at risk of losing so much. Okay, I’ll go in even though I’m busy and my life is full. I’ll join this board. I joined the board along with three or four people at the same time, and we were tasked with saving the organization. And they really relied on my decades of experience in nonprofit administration, fundraising, media work, cultural production, like, kind of all of it, to say, okay, how do we get out of this? And we did. I served on the board for six years. The last four, four and a half years, I was chair of the board. They wanted me to become chair of the board really quickly, but I needed to learn what that meant. And I’m really happy about that.

Along the way, I started to embrace myself as an artist again, and part of that was me meeting Julian [Delgado Lopera]. Julian had worked on a show with Rafa [*phonetic*—I forget his last name, oh my God—Rafael [*phonetic*] on a show called *Ambiente*, and it was on queer Latinx ephemera, and—

Q: And is Julian Julian Delgado Lopera?

Aguirre: Yes. So Julian and I had met—I think Julian had reached out to me when they were working on the SF Weekly articles, and they wanted to talk with Adela, and so, often, Adela doesn't respond or is, like, impossible to get to. And so, for some people, [*laughs*] like, if you reach out to me, sometimes I can be like, hey, okay, I'll make this happen. So I did that. That's how I met Julian electronically. We didn't actually meet in person until later, when my work with the Historical Society, and I helped inform, like, provide historical context, and Julian loved *Viva 16* and met Mahogany and a whole bunch of people through my work, and, of course, Adela.

And I liked that show, although it was another instance of, like, oh, this is not what I want, but I was not the curator, so what I was clear on was, okay, if I have these feelings and I have these thoughts, this judgment, I can't just lead with that. I need to do my own show. And so I proposed a show on chosen familias [*families*]. For me, it was because, over and over again, we'll meet people who don't know each other, and I know that they're fabulous, and great, and part of a bigger story. It always baffles me that they don't know each other, so this was a construct for us to be in the same room, and for me to say, like, "Hey, this is my tía [*aunt*]. Hey,

this is my nibbling. Hey, they do this. Hey, she does that. You should know each other. I'm going to go over here now." And then, whatever happens happens.

And it also was a way for us to look—for me, and Juan Fernandez [*phonetic*] was a co-curator with me—to move past social media and to move past—like, Esta Noche had closed, and there wasn't awareness of how—we don't have spaces, and even, like a post-gay, post-queer kind of thing, where people are saying, "Oh, yeah, that's in the past." For me, I thought, well, we still need these connections. We still need family.

I sometimes would have a cultural presentation, and then, at a Q and A, I would get these questions that would almost get me stuck. Like, at one point, there was an event at the library, where I showed some movies or shared some poetry, and then two people in the Q and A had questions related to, like, how do you rebuild hope? And how do you move past these horrible moments of—long moments of challenges? And then another one was like, what was it like to be inside of Esta Noche? So these are questions that are not easily answered. They're really about longing and about connection, missing—it's not fear of missing out. It's more like sadness of missing out and, like, oh, I want that. How can I get that? Can you help me with this? Can you give this to me? And the sad part of it is I cannot. I can describe some of these things, but it's a new thing that's going to bring us together.

And so, for me, I realize, oh, I need to create a new thing. That new thing was this exhibition inviting—I think I invited thirty or forty people, and, of those, twenty of us agreed to create family photo albums. There were a couple rules because so much narcissism is cultivated on

social media with selfies, and it's ridiculous. So the one rule was the person of the album can only be in five photos. The rest of them are to be people you love, people you care for, your family, biological, chosen, and the moments—you can explain, you can have captions, but the photos need to show love or a moment that helped you to build hope and resilience and find community. It really was trying to get answers to the questions that I could not answer. And, along the way, for us to literally come together, share, and decentralize the curation, also, but have curation because what's on social media is horribly not curated. So I really was clear, like, this is not social media.

Also, this is not—there were some photographers who were like, “Oh, I do photography. I'll just use what I did in my last show,” and I was like, no, that's not this. This is very personal, and it's not about the quality of the photos. Mind you, I'm not going to have any shitty photos in the show, but *[laughs]* it's not about, like, just the beauty of the photo. The beauty is the content of the photo.

Q: And this exhibition was which year?

Aguirre: 2019.

Q: And what do you think that this exhibition captured that needed capturing about queer chosen familias [families]?

Aguirre: That we find ways to connect with each other, even without bars, and even in the midst of great political turmoil and discrimination. God knows I tried to block out when Trump was elected. When was Trump elected?

Q: 2016.

Aguirre: Thank you. So—*[laughs]*

Q: *[Laughs]* Sorry. I know you wanted to keep that blocked out.

Aguirre: I totally want to keep it blocked out. But it really did inform how we were vilified at the very beginning as brown people and, of course, queer people, and how it kind of makes sense to adopt this idea of, I'm post-queer, or I'm post-identity, especially when we are being attacked on those fronts. And, for me, what I wanted to highlight was, no. We are what we are, and it's okay what we are, and the old ways of how youth are defining queerness, or latinidad [Latinness], or whatever, that's okay, too. But that, maybe, can live in the past. Let's look at what we are right now, and let's represent ourselves, and, along the way, you curate your own photo album, and we had, like, five or six really big photos. So, like, in my living room is one of those photos. The other photos were from the actual photo albums themselves.

And some people thought that was the show. That absolutely was not the show. That is what got put into, like, the collateral materials about the show. But the show was literally you going into the museum. There were stands that had three or four photo albums on each stand, and then, in

one kiosk, there was *Viva 16*, where you could put on some headphones and watch it on a monitor. And then, on a big screen, were excerpts from clips that we had never shown anywhere. So it was an experience where, if you wanted to spend only five minutes looking at the photos on the wall, you could. That was something. If you've never seen trans and queer Latinx people in a positive way, you're going to see it now because we love each other, and this is what these photos are. But, if you have time, and you're open, and you're curious, learn about our families. We are a family, and then, here, each of us is sharing our own families with you. If you want to spend time, some people went through every one of those albums, which would take hours and multiple visits. And to that, I think, oh my God. That's amazing.

And the experience was one where, okay, this is beyond social media. This is beyond what's normally in museums. It's beyond even the space. The space of the Historical Society Museum is actually really tiny, so what I took as a limitation, I inverted it and said, okay, I don't need all that space. Let's create the spaces within each photo album, these little worlds. I'm super happy about that.

It happened right before the pandemic as a means to counter what was happening in terms of racial violence, and in terms of Trumpism and sort of being lost. Like, where are we now? This, for me, was a way to say, "No. We are still a community. We are made up of many people. And hurry up, meet each other, and do more work and projects, and be great. Do great stuff." So I'm super happy about that. I also produced—there was an arts performance show that was called *Aplauso*. That was a lot of fun, and it had live singing and drag, and that was a lot of fun. And we

had a panel, and it really was, like, many different events. It felt like the old queer Latino artist coalition days.

And, of course, I'm extra happy about it because it happened before the pandemic. It meant—like, going into the pandemic, even though it was really tough, all of us who were in this show as contributing artists and people who experienced the show could take away, like, okay, I may feel like I'm in isolation. I may literally be alone, and I know that I'm going to be able to connect with some people, even if it's one or two people. It's going to be worth it because I need that connection. And then, coming sort of out of the pandemic, or this new version of the pandemic, it's meant—some of us are able to reconnect in profound ways, and then, I hope, for the rest of us, we're able to just connect with new people, and, for me, that's regenerative.

Q: Yes. Wonderful. Thank you so much. One of the things you mentioned was identity and identities, the ways of defining identities. And you identify as genderqueer this time. Can you talk about what the term genderqueer means to you personally?

Aguirre: Yes. I think—let me get some water real quick. *[Pause]* Around this time, I also was invited to participate in the Queer California exhibition as part of the Museum of Trans[gender] History and Art, MOTHA, which is awesome. And what that helped me to do was reconnect with how me being genderqueer was important throughout my whole time as an adult. Let's say, like, eighteen and up. Although, really, I was genderqueer before then. It really was that, once I was eighteen, I was able to present and embrace that in a much bigger way. For me, because I'm older, and trans was so specific and exclusive to be able to say that you were trans and hold that

as an identity meant you literally had to check a whole bunch of boxes in terms of surgeries, or medical procedures, or medicines. And that's always been a thing.

For me, genderqueer—I was happy that I grew up in a family where, like, my mom's favorite artist was Little Richard [*phonetic*], and I always thought, oh, that's interesting. I like his makeup. And then, pop culture—I learned about Prince, and Boy George, and Annie Lennox, and all I could think was, yes. Whatever they're doing, they're not on the far ends of gender spectrum, and, when I went to Stanford in '86, I took a class on human sexuality, and I learned about sexuality as a spectrum, or the Kinsey Scale, I guess is the literal—like, where are you on the Kinsey Scale in terms of queerness or sexuality? And, for me, it was really easy for me to think of that as gender, too. And, at the time, I was reading, let's say, Adrienne Rich and radical feminists talking about gender—and Gloria Anzaldua, and Cherrie Moraga, and how gender was so limiting and awful and led to structural violence in marriages and society.

And what I was always clear on is that is in me. Like, this is built into my DNA the same way that the magic and—lots of stuff that is wondrous, I also have within me. A long history of toxic masculinity that's been passed on to me and thrust upon me by, just, generations of this, and what I was always really clear on is it will end with me. My dad was a horribly violent person in terms of, like, communication, but also, sometimes, physical violence and the threat physical violence. And what I'm clear on is that we, as humans, all have that ability to go off, or to lose it, or however we want to characterize it, that it's built into our DNA, and then some of us are literally taught to be violent. So my dad had taught me—as a queer sissy femme, what he thought he had to do was to instill in me the ability to kill people—to defend myself, not to kill people

just to kill people, but to—you know, if push comes to shove and they're going to kill you, you should kill them. He was a marine, and none of that was metaphorical [*laughs*] or figurative. This was literally, like, if it's you and the other person, here are three ways you can kill them. So I still know those ways. [*Laughs*] It's awful. It's an awful thing to contemplate, and when, really, maybe the idea is to defend yourself, he was really clear, you need to know that there's some people who will want you dead. And it can go from, like, an argument to them trying to kill you very quickly. So you need to be ready to do it.

For me, what I realized was, okay, also, what was trying to be forced upon me in terms of gender had to end with me. So, like, literally, my parents wanted me to procreate. They wanted me to have children, and when I told them as a young person, "I don't want kids, and I don't like girls that way, so it's not going to happen accidentally. It could happen, but it's not just going to happen, like what happened with my cousins and everybody else." And so they were like, well, you don't have to tell the woman that you're queer. You could just, you know, get her pregnant, and then we'll take care of it. And I was like, no. That's horrible. That's a really fucked up thing to want me to do, and why would you want that? And they were really clear. They wanted me to pass on the line, the family. Like, they wanted Aguirre as a last name. They wanted me to continue it through me.

And so what I shared with them is, one, no. There's a whole bunch of that that's wrong, and I don't believe in that. And I'm going to change. If all that you're really caring about is that I continue the last name, I'm going to change my first name first, just so that you know I will change my last name if you don't stop trying to force me, because this was over many years.

Even though they knew I was queer and genderqueer, they were like, all of that's okay. Just go get somebody pregnant.

And so I did. I changed my original birth name—first name legally, where I went as a teenager. In those days, you could just go into the DMV and fill out a form, and then they would change your name. You didn't have to go to court. And then, you could take your new ID to the social security office, and then they would change your name. It's all different now. And so, when I showed them, I said, "I changed my name," and they were shocked and horribly sad. I said, "I did this because it's clear you're trying to force me into what you think I need to be as a man, and I'm not going to do it. And I don't want to change my last name, but I will if you keep hassling me. I'm not connected to this idea."

And so, for me, genderqueerness—it's different than being nonbinary. I am nonbinary. I am genderqueer. But the queerness part is me being upfront about it the whole—like, a long time, and me fighting for it, and me being transparent around how, no, there's a lot of things that I'm rejecting that—they're going to end with me. And I know that this can happen on a bigger scale, but I'm only going to focus on me, and everybody else, everything else, I have faith. Things will change.

Q: What might you say about the way you've seen things change in terms of—you know, you spoke to witnessing a prior generation of queer culture where being trans meant checking many particular boxes to where we are now in terms of gender nonconforming vocabularies and possibilities that are available, both in terms of language and in terms of what's affirmed, right?

Transmasculine, transfeminine, gender fluid, genderqueer, nonbinary, all these—what have you observed about what has and hasn't changed in terms of trans and gender nonconforming queer culture?

Aguirre: I learned that much of the world has actually caught up to me and us as people, and it's an amazing thing. What happened was I connected with the Still Here San Francisco writing group. There's a group led by Natalia Vergil [*phonetic*] and a few others. Actually, what happened was I connected—Julian had done a show at Brava Theater. I forget what it's called, but it was a fabulous show. We sold out the whole place, showed *Viva 16*, and Still Here gave a performance of spoken word poetry. And they had reached out to me previously. Nati [*phonetic*] and some of the other writers knew that I was a writer.

The construct of Still Here at that time was you had to have been born and raised in San Francisco, so when they invited me to be a part of the group, I said, "I don't feel comfortable taking up a space. I don't meet your criteria." They said, "Well, we'll give you an exception." I said, "I'm actually not into those kinds of exceptions. If you really think that this is important, maybe change your criteria. I'll be over here writing poetry whenever you're ready." [*Laughs*] And they did. They changed the criteria to be, okay, well, if you—let's say I got here when I was nineteen, and so, they were like, okay, you really developed as an adult here. We'll count that.

So I joined them. What I learned with them was I didn't have to explain gender, or I did not have to explain myself. Most of the writers were younger than me. Much younger than me. And the whole conversation around gender had changed by this time. So this was, like, 2017, maybe

2016. So the show by Julian and RADAR Productions was called Missing You: An Investigation of Queer Memory and the Mission. And that was February 18, 2017. Then, I collaborated with Chica Boom on The HookUp/Displacement/Barhopping/Drama/Tour, and that was May 2017. And then, I co-presented with Still Here at an urban film festival on Sixteenth and Valencia, the Eric Asada [*phonetic*] space, where I connected with Nati in a big way.

And what happened was I decided, okay, this can be some of my new chosen family, the Still Here writing group. I participated in—I think it was an eight or ten-week generative writing workshop, and what I found was me being genderqueer and trans—it finally—not only was I understood. What I now see is that younger people, poly, and pan, it's all part of the vocabulary now. It's all part of the lexicon. And, more than that, there are lots of queer and trans people who recognize me immediately. Like, just seeing me. Literally, they see me and understand me.

But then, they're like, I am, too, or, like, hey—there's also much more openness, like, sexually and relationship-wise, that I think, oh, this is very interesting and also means I have to be more careful because—or let's say I find myself, throughout my life, on accidental dates, where I think we're just going to have a meal or something, and I realize, oh, crap. I'm on a date, and oh, I've done this again. How did this happen?

Q: And you didn't realize that it was?

Aguirre: Yes, and it usually was, like, lesbians or genderqueer people, and then I think, oh, oops. And so this new group, I realized, oh, it's all open. So, just, I need to embrace being able to say,

yes, I'm not available, or let's be friends. Like, friends without benefits. And, *[laughs]* to be specific, it's okay to—

Q: I do have to actually clarify that because—*[laughs]* because people have not automatically closed the channel because of a more limited definition of sexuality.

Aguirre: No, you can be friends and, definitely, like, the kids don't care.

Q: Like, it's all possible.

Aguirre: It's all definitely possible. *[Laughs]* You could find yourself, really quickly, in a situation where, like, uh-oh. I need to lead with, you know, I love this, and you're awesome, and this is what I'm up for. This is what I'm available for.

Q: You have to be clearer.

Aguirre: Consent is sexy is what I learned. And so the Still Here group in particular was a way for me to embrace racial and gender and queer politics, and genderqueerness—also, what happened was, I think, the state of California changed the law to where you could go to a DMV and then say you're nonbinary. So, like, the t-shirt that I'm wearing right now, gender x, is because, on my ID, it now had x under gender, and the first week that was possible, I got that done at the DMV. Then, I also did my legal name change again. And so, this time, I was like, okay, Tina is—I want to send a signal to people. Like, one, Tina is obviously a femme name, but

also, me being nonbinary is to signal that I am, on the spectrum, closer to trans woman, and there are many times when I get characterized as a trans woman, and then, I'm not going to push back against that. I think, okay, that's cool. I'm cool with that because I'm much closer to that most of the time.

Q: Do you identify as being part of the trans spectrum or on the trans spectrum? Is that language that resonates for you?

Aguirre: Yes. I am transgender.

Q: Yes, you are trans, transgender, on the trans spectrum, and genderqueer. All of the above.

Aguirre: Yes. Now, it's expansive and inclusive, and what I'm really clear on is the younger generation—it's not an issue. The older generation, we've had to negotiate with each other. So, like, let's say some of my trans mothers—the ones who are still alive, or tías [aunts], we've had to have conversations about this, and—

Q: How has that gone?

Aguirre: Mostly good. [*Laughs*] Not always. One of my tías [aunts] was Elena [*phonetic*] or Felicia Flames [Elizondo]. Felicia was a sister to Teresita, so she was one of my tías [aunts], and she, and me, and Teresita were always in conflict, mostly because Elena had top and bottom surgery, and so she was like, "I'm a woman and you are not. Neither of you are women." And

we were like, “Fuck you.” [*Laughs*] I don’t give a shit about that. And Teresita passed, but Felicia only passed a couple years ago, but she was still around when this was out, and she was part of a pushback against the redefinition of trans. And she would scold younger people when they would use words that she didn’t like. She didn’t like queer. She didn’t like the expansive definition of trans. And she did not understand nonbinary.

But she understood me, so this is the weird thing where, like, people would understand me, and they would just think, oh, well, that’s just Tina. Like, oh, Tina’s always done that. Tina’s always been that. And I love Tina, so okay. I’m okay. I understand Tina. But let’s get back to fighting about gender, [*laughs*] and definitions, and how it has to fit this way. So Felicia was one of those people, and that’s okay. I did not need her approval. I never needed her approval. I don’t need fuckin’ approval. [*Laughs*]

Being genderqueer has always meant that—there’s an aspect of this that is countercultural, and it’s built into it. It’s why I put that in my—when people ask me, genderqueer means you have to say the word queer, first of all. So if you have any hang-ups around the word queer, that’s on you, but this is me, and that’s it. It’s open ended, so I want older and people my age and younger people to know, like, this is what I’m doing. You can do this, too, if you want.

Q: So part of what you’re doing is holding your truth, and, also, part of what you’re doing is modeling possibility for others in the community and other generations.

Aguirre: Yes. And, now that I accept that I am in positions of leadership—I have been in positions of leadership since I can remember. However, I'm in these positions of leadership, let's say in the last ten years, where I'm leading with that. Then, that means you get all of me. A lot of the times, organizations, or a project, or collaborations, they want a part of me, but what they quickly learn is, ha ha, no, you don't get just the part of me. You get all of me. You don't like all of me, I don't give a shit. It's too late. *[Laughs]* One, we're in this thing. Let's finish this thing.

For me, all I think is, do I want to partner with you again? Do I want to collaborate with you again? I'm willing to do all kinds of projects, short and long-term, and, along the way, mostly what I'm figuring out is, do I want to work with you again? Are you dynamic? Do you follow up? Do you have integrity? Do I love you? Do I connect with you in a way that I want to do this with you again on something else? And I welcome when people do that, too, and when they're honest and say, "This doesn't work for me." I really, really welcome that, and part of that is me showing up as my full self. I want others to show up as their full selves, and if it works out, that's awesome. And if not, that's okay. I don't have to be in everybody's project. *[Laughs]* I don't have to work on every— it's impossible. Like, I don't have enough time, anyway.

Q: And you're in demand, clearly. *[Laughs]* What hopes and visions do you have for queer and trans futures? Best possible future, what would it look like?

Aguirre: Best possible futures for us as queer and trans people I think is happening now. So, like, I am a part of Queer Ancestors Projects. They have a visual component where they do silkscreening, learning, and learning about history, and they do silkscreen graphics. Then, there's

a writing component, and I participated in both of those cohorts as an elder—they called me an ancestor—for, like, three or four years where I will show *Viva 16*, or I will show clips on Teresita, and I will talk about our stories. And what I see are younger—these are young adults, transitional age youth, eighteen to twenty-four, especially. Let's say nine out of ten people identify as genderqueer, nonbinary, or trans and use they/them pronouns.

And so, in that context, we are the norm. This is for us, and it's now. It's not the future. This is—fuck that. The future—[laughs] I've always, always pushed back against that, the idea that, you know, my time is in the future. No, my time has always been now. And, in this context, I'm not alone. Not only am I not alone, these are younger people who are, like, ah, you're here. We've been looking for you. We didn't know that we were looking for you. We didn't know that we needed your story. Now that you're here, please take your time [laughs] and tell us and share with us. Let's have this conversation. Let's engage. And so, for me, the future is now. Like, what is happening right now is new iterations of great art, and community, and coming together, and we don't have everything that we need. We don't have all the spaces that we need. But we're making them. We're finding what we need. And part of that is also us building a resilience and the necessity to cultivate hope and love in a way that I want to keep centered in everything. So, yeah, I don't know. I'm happy about where we're at right now.

I do see, let's say, on the political levels, we have a lot of mobilization to do. So what's clear is how trans people are being targeted by laws on hyperlocal, then state, and then federal levels, and international levels. It's clear that we are used to raise money by conservatives. We are used as bogeypeople, scary figures, scary monsters. Drag queens are now even being targeted, and I

think, oh, how ridiculous is that? Drag queen story time is—in the '70s, there used to be clowns who were hired for parties. Essentially, it's the same thing. I know some drag queens may not like that, but some drag queens will acknowledge that it is like a clown. There is an aspect of it that's entertaining. What's presented in drag queen story hour is not the most subversive form of drag. And all I could think is, oh, you're going to fight against that? You're fighting against joy. Let's do this, then. Like, you know, if you try to outlaw a woman's right to her own body, or a person's right to their own body in terms of reproduction rights, and joy, you're trying to outlaw joy, then let's do it because a whole bunch of corrective actions need to take place. They've been overdue.

So I think ten, fifteen years ago, when I worked at LYRIC [Center for LGBTQQ+ Youth], most of the young people were like, "I don't identify as gay. I don't identify as trans. All of that—those labels don't mean anything to me." That's fine. I think each generation needs to redefine itself. I don't care so much about the labels either, except some of them are important in terms of political constructs. Where we are now is whatever identity, whatever terminology we use, it's clear that we are attacked. We are being targeted. And that means we have to mobilize.

So, for me, a future is we have many more trans, queer people of color in leadership because, like, me—I'm not the only one that's had to step up. So many of us have had to step up. And the future, I think, will be better. It will come out of this strife, though. I think what a lot of the right does not understand is the more that you try to codify this, you try to erase us through law, the more that we're going to realize, oh, then we need to be legislators. We need to be judges. We need to be throughout society. If you, ten, fifteen years ago, would have asked those younger

people, “Do you see yourself maybe running for office, or looking at policy, or thinking about all of these sociopolitical constructs,” the answer probably would be, “No. No, that’s in the past. That’s a part of the civil rights movement or something that was before me.” Whereas, now, it’s pretty clear, “Hell yes. We need to vote, and we need to mobilize, and we need to actually be everywhere.”

Q: What strikes or surprised you most about this current period of your life?

Aguirre: That I don’t give a shit. [*Laughs*] I don’t give a shit. I think I knew, learning from my elders, that, like, hearing over and over again, at a certain age, you just sort of stop, like—I don’t know. Giving too many cares about things. And so, what it really means is, okay, I have a limited amount of time on this Earth, and I’ve always kind of known that. However, I’ve made it this far, which means, okay, let’s say there’s a max of how long I can be on this Earth in a way where I’m productive and healthy. On my dad’s side, a lot of people lived to their nineties. On my mom’s side, a lot of people lived until their sixties or seventies. And I’m fifty-four, so that means, okay, in between, if you take an average, [*laughs*] let’s say maybe another twenty-something years that I have on this Earth. And, of those, how much do I want to work at a level where the balance—I can easily get out of balance in terms of my physical and spiritual, emotional self. Probably, like, ten years or so, or ten or fifteen years is what I could easily say.

That means I don’t have that much time for that many projects. Whatever I’m doing, whatever job I’m in at the moment, it is finite, and if somebody pulls some babosadas [*nonsense*] where I’m like, I know you’re working out your stuff, I do have empathy and compassion for that. I

know that we're people of color, we're trans, women are underrepresented. I know because we've had to adopt all kinds of strategies to survive and thrive. Hopefully thrive. That means a lot of tactics that maybe are not great, like, in the long term.

At the same time, it's not my job to fix somebody. I'm not a therapist, and I'm not a trauma-based therapist. Let's say working to undo traumas—if we've grown up with these traumas that are inflicted upon us for decade upon decade, it's likely going to take decades to undo them. And so what the clarity that I have is, oh, that's not in my power. I don't have the ability to do this. I'm not going to fix you. It's up to you. For me, it's pretty easy to say—like, one of the questions was when I was asked, “How do you cultivate hope? How do you keep doing this?”

And I said, I don't know. I just kind of wake up in the morning. I think, okay, I have some work to do. I have these projects to do. I'm going to do my best, and then, at the end of the day, I think, okay. Hopefully, I feel good about what I did, and if not, the next day, there's another day. And then, I go to sleep, try to get rest, take care of myself, and then wake up and do it all over again. And then, what I can take away from it is, doing that ten, twenty, thirty years, by the time you get to thirty years, you're at a place where you think, okay, I definitely am human, and I can make mistakes. That's okay. But I also have clarity on—I've done good. I've tried to improve the world, and the rest of it will work itself out.

Q: Wow. Thank you so much. What do you most wish younger generations of LGBTQ+ people of color could understand or see about your generation?

Aguirre: What do I wish they could see? I don't know. I think they see most of it. I—

Q: Or what would you like them to know as a leader and mentor from your generation?

Aguirre: I think it's important for all of us to try to find ways to make new connections. And so it's not just younger people. It's that it takes all of us to have that kind of openness and curiosity, so I think, really, what I would tell all of us who are kind of coming out of this place, phase of, like, isolation, post-pandemic, and scariness, racial reckoning and Trump, and all of that that we're still facing, it's easy to try to say, "It's safer in my cocoon, or safer just in my little, tiny pod or whatever."

And that, I think, that works in the short term, but it doesn't work in the long term and doesn't work for the human project, like, us. Like, learning and moving past our foibles or flaws—I think we need to come together and connect. So I think I would just say, "It's scary to put yourself out there, and it's worth it. And, like, there are going to be times that are fucked up, and sad, and horrible, but there are also going to be so many times that are fabulous and grand. Beautiful. It's worth it."

Q: Thank you so much. Wow. And then, my last question is, thinking about someone listening to this archive and to your incredible voice a hundred years from now, is there anything that you would most want them to hear or understand about your life?

Aguirre: I don't know if it's about my life, but I will say I'm sorry that you're still having to deal with so many fucked up things because humans are flawed, and none of this—the horrible parts of how there's rape, and murder, and oppression, they're not going to go away. They're a part of our DNA the same way that hope, and love, and beauty are a part of our DNA. So what I'd say is, first, I'm sorry, and you're welcome. Like, this is what we are, and then, the rest of it, I think, oh, like, this was an interesting time, and I hope that you can take something away from this.

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

Aguirre: Fuck shit up. [*Laughs*] Fuck shit up. Life is short. Do something that fucks everything up, and then, make something grand. That's the second part of it is it's okay to take stuff apart, but then, make something that's better. I think we have an obligation—or I have an obligation to put something that's wondrous in the world, into existence. It doesn't matter that it's short term. It doesn't matter. I need to be a part of bringing this magic alive. So can you.

Q: Tina Valentina [phonetic] Aguirre, thank you.

Aguirre: You're welcome.

Q: Thank you so much.

Aguirre: You're welcome. Thank you for doing this.

[END OF INTERVIEW]