I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Nitza Tufiño

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Nitza Tufiño conducted by Denice Frohman on August 19, 2023. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders project.

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

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center	Session Number: 1
Narrator: Nitza Tufiño	Location: New York City, NY
Interviewer: Denice Frohman	Date: August 19, 2023

Q: Check, check, check, one two, one two. Let me put myself down. Can you count to ten?

Tufiño: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven—

Q: Great. You sound great.

Tufiño: Good? Okay. Great, great.

Q: Thank you so much. All right, we're recording, everything sounds really good. Hello, hello, hello. If I turn this—I'm going to get a little closer to the microphone. Okay. Okay, here we go. I'm going to press Record here in case—there we go. I'm really excited to be sitting here with contemporary visual artist, activist, educator Nitza Tufiño. Thank you so much for sitting here with me to have this interview.

Tufiño: Thanks to you for thinking of me and bringing me into this mix of talking about my life, you know, and talking about me being a woman, being a woman, lover, a mother, an artist, an activist, all of those different things. Spirituality. I'm glad to talk to you about my life since I was a little kid, when I was growing up, you know?

Q: We're going to get into all of that. We are doing this interview in your studio in Spanish Harlem in El Barrio.

Tufiño: In El Barrio.

Q: We're in El Barrio, and I'm really, really excited to be here. We're surrounded by Nitza's paintings and prints, and works in progress. Really looking forward to talking about some of the paintings in this room, and some that you've shown me that you've done about your family. Just to start our interview, can you please say your full name, your year of birth and your place of birth?

Tufiño: I'm Nitza Ives [*phonetic*] Tufiño Aguirre. I was born in Mexico City, Distrito Federal [Federal District] en la Calle de los Doctores [Colonia Doctores]. And I was born at home with students that were studying medicine, friends of my father. He was studying in San Carlos. He was a painter, and the other ones were doctors, studying to be doctors. So I was born at home when my mother gave birth to me. And then after that, I was born there, my grandmother, Goyita, Gregoria Figueroa, on my father's side, came from Puerto Rico to take care of me while my mother worked on my father with a school. And a lot of things happened during that time. I used to cry a lot when they used to go to a marketplace, and they used to leave me with my father, so my father didn't know what to do with me when I was a kid, so he did a painting of my grandmother, which I still have with me, which he put near my crib. And because I saw her, I always thought she was always there with me, so I wouldn't cry as much. So trying to will as an artist to do creative things, so that *apaciguarme* [I calm down]. And then after that, they came to

the States, and then we went to Puerto Rico. So I grew up in Puerto Rico. I grew up in Puerto Rico with my grandmother, my great grandmother, who had been my great grandmother who was born in 1855, had been part of the slavery in Puerto Rico. Her mother and father were Yoruba and Taíno Indians. And this is something—and this happens in the Puerto Rican families—we don't talk much about that period within the family. We try to keep it hush, because we don't want the great grandmother to feel bad about it. And she died, she was 112.

Q: Oh!

Tufiño: I think I was seventeen, eighteen. So I spent a lot of time with her, so she explained to me many, many things about—the hurricanes that used to come, when slavery in 1863, or '73, was passed a law so that there would be no more slavery in Puerto Rico. So I come from all of that, you know? The traditions, the African tradition, the Spanish Egyptian—the gypsy, flamenco traditions, spirituality, La Mesa Blanca [The White Table], Santería, you know, the different things, Yemanjá [*phonetic*], Ochún, los *vejigantes* de Loíza Aldea en Santiago [Fiesta de Santiago Apóstol]. And they not only wait for the festivity in Loíza, they also do it in the Carnival. So I come from all of that, you know, growing up like that in Puerto Rico, and growing up, how would I say, I saw the trolley, the train in Puerto Rico, when there used to be a train that used to go around Puerto Rico that then Luis Muñoz Marín had to kill it, because there used to be too many fires. So I grew up with all of that, you know what I mean.

But growing up as a kid and going to school and having friends and all of that, I saw many, many things that were, how would I say, were not correct, but that you saw and you didn't understand,

and they were not explained to you, like now I'm a woman, I live and I married a woman, her name is Rafaela Billini. I have married before, my first husband was Jewish. I have a daughter, her name is Rachel Breitman. And then in my second marriage with a man that was Japanese, really liked culturally, and his name is Ken Taniguchi. So my choice of now falling in love with a woman, because I was open to love. To love, to be open to love. So if I'm open to love, I don't have those physical or those mental things of, you know, asking myself, I just let myself go with the love. And she's a wonderful person to love, and I'm very happy that she's my wife. And we both get along, we're fine. My children love her as a mom. She's a great mom.

But it's been quite a journey in terms of homosexuality with society. We fought a lot for—she fought a lot for gay marriage, so that we can have the same opportunities; medical insurances, benefits from the job, things like that. Mainly those are the things that you're fighting, is owning a house and I passed away, she gets to live in the house, and my children get to have a good time with it. So these are all things that you have to fight in this society. To me, I understand it, because I was married to men, and I had all those things, so why couldn't I have it if I was with a woman? So we fought for it, and we got it, and all of that. But still, a lot of things need to change, but these are—how would I think—things that happen to your life, when I was a kid, growing up, a child, like, I was forced to wear nice dresses, I looked really cute with my ribbons and my little white shoes, and all of that. But then I didn't want to be so dressed up like that, because then I had to watch out how I sat down. They were after me, you know, things that I said that I have to be proper, this and that. Meanwhile, I loved better when I wore pants, and I could run and climb a tree and be with my friends and be more relaxed, and all of that.

So I used to fight all the time, why if I have to go out to anything I have to wear a dress? So I used to fight with my grandmother like crazy, and my mother. And they used to say, "No no no, you're going to go through this activity as a family. You've got to wear this dress, you've got to wear that." So I had to, I didn't have a choice. But, you know, already at that time, it's, like, you're developing your personality, you know, things you like, things you don't like. And sometimes your parents sort of, like—I mean, I understand for school and for certain things, they want everybody to look the same, or whatever. But since you're a child, you're still molding your personality, molding who you are, you know, what things you like, what things you don't like. What you like to read or not read, you know what I mean? Asking questions they don't want to answer during that time, in Puerto Rico, this is, like, the '50s, you know? And even though we were very much Americanized, because the school, you have to learn English. They were teaching you English and all of that, you went to Catholic school, it was more English and more learning other things.

But then, so there's sort of, like, it's also the fact that, you know, why do you have to—if you're a woman, you have to—you know, you're a mother, you have to think like a mother. But sometimes if you're alone with a child and you get divorced, you become the father, too. You're the father, the mother, you're everything, you know what I mean? So all these things that they throw at you that have nothing to do with female, male, or whatever, it has to do more with ideas, forming ideas and becoming something for society and all of that—more humanistic. It has to be a more humanistic approach, rather than because you're female, you think this way, because you're male, you think this way, because you've got to do this, you've got to do that—

instead of more humanistic in terms of all the things, because you're molding yourself and you're molding yourself as a teenager.

Then later on when you come into the States, then you're thrown in, wow, wait a second, I don't speak too much English, now I've got to learn English quickly. And then you're got to know about the Afro Americans, and you've got to walk around Harlem during the summer, everybody's Black out there, and they're sitting in the stoops and all of that, and there's not many white people—nobody's mixed during the '60s. That's what happened to me. I was, like, my father took me to Harlem, and at work I said, "I didn't understand why people are in the stoops, why they're outside, all of that, and you're the only one walking around there, you're Latino, but you're not afraid." My father was not afraid, because my father would say, "I'm a Black man, we're Black people." You know, "We're Brown people." I always grew up with that. I never thought that I was white, even though my grandfather was white, and my other grandfather on my mother's side, Agustín Tufiño and José Aguirre [*phonetic*] were white, Spanish. As a matter of fact, on my mother's side, she was Mexican, and she was part of the Fridos, she was a model. She modeled for Diego Rivera, for Federico Cantú [Garza], for Hoffman, many sculpturists. I was freaked out when I went to Mexico and I started going around seeing these paintings of my mom when she was young. And also, my mother had a different mentality also, because she had been so much around artists, you know? Like, one thing is just one thing, one thing has many greys [*phonetic*] on many situations that you have to look at, you know, more humanistic.

So I grew up in that sense that—I'd hear myself just to want to think, to think things over, and then choose what is the best and the best convenient for you that don't do any harm to anybody else, or do harm to yourself. But you never know, you know what I'm saying? So it's kind of interesting. And then because difference, two different types of culture, even though we have Catholicism, which is very strict, and then put so many fears into you since you're a kid, you know what I'm saying, which I totally disagree. You know? Because now I became a Buddhist, I'm with SGI, and I thank Ikeda for all his doing for humanistic in the world. And I'm against—I'm totally against violence, and all of that, violence against a woman, how many women they're killing all over the world, and the reason why, you know what I mean? *El machismo nos mata* [Machismo kills us]. *Pero hay machismo de los dos lados* [But there is machismo on both sides], not only from the male, the woman also is part of that machismo, because she's bringing it about, you know? You bring it about.

So it wasn't easy, growing up in Puerto Rico and being a girl. And then being in the States, because always they were taking care of me, there were things, I couldn't go out, I couldn't stay late. My brother could, because he was a male. He can go out and whatever, no, you have to stay home. Or I got to see who you're going to see, you know, it's very difficult, growing up like that. And then in the States I was more open, but then when I went to school in Mexico, I stayed there going into the university, then I learn more about art, and I wanted to do my own thing. I started doing printing, Leopoldo Méndez was one of my mentors from the Taller de Gráfica Popular [People's Graphic Workshop]. Also in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I admire Myrna Báez, I admire Isabel Bernal, who work for DIVEDCO [Puerto Rican Division of Community Education, División de Educación de la Comunidad], I don't know how she did it. Being a woman working

in DIVEDCO with so many men that were writers and artists, there were not that many women working in that sense. So in our history, it's, like—and it's still happening today, you know—there's always the Boys Club, the Males Club. And we, the woman, have to create activism, and I start teaching them and saying no, this is how we feel, and this is where we should go with it, you know, and start saying it and doing it. It is very important to—how would I say—to start, be the first one to start changing things so that for the other women, youngers [*phonetic*] that are coming alone into the future, you know what I'm saying? To me, that's very, very important.

Q: Thank you so much for, I mean, sharing so much of your journey, really challenging gender roles, challenging the boxes that you were put in because of your being a woman, and who you loved. A couple thi—there's so much that I want to ask you about. But you talked—I mean, you were born in Mexico City, but you moved to San Juan when you were one.

Tufiño: Yes.

Q: You were there until you were in high school.

Tufiño: Right. No, I came to junior high school here for two years.

Q: Oh, you did? And then you went—

Tufiño: Yes, eighth and ninth grade. My parents send me here to school so I could learn English, and then I didn't like it so much, so I went back to Puerto Rico. And then I went to high school in Puerto Rico.

Q: And you talked about your father, Rafael Tufiño, as a very prominent muralist and painter. And you took after him in some ways, in terms of the—that artistic drive, that artistic interest. Can you share more about his—I don't know, what was it like to grow up as the daughter of a very well-known painter? I mean, your mom was also artistic.

Tufiño: Right, right. Well, it's really difficult, because even today, I'm an artist and I'm self-made, and my work is very different from my father, even the quality is just as good. But people is, like, "Oh, you're the daughter," you're the daughter, you're the daughter. So that's going to be like that until the day I die. So being a kid, you know, growing up with him, you have a lot of good things because you get to know everybody. You know? Like, I knew [Luis] Palés Matos, the poet, who wrote about our Afro, how would I say, culture. He was from Guayama [Puerto Rico], so I was very, very close to people. I was very close to Míriam Colón, and then later on I was with her in the traveling theater, and I helped them a lot to rebuild the traveling theater and make a connection with Pregones, before she passed away. We made her do a, you know, United, the traveling theater with Pregones before she passed away. So I did that, but I knew her from the '60s from Puerto Rico, donde vi *La Carreta*, René Marqués, Emilio Díaz Valcárcel. I grew up with all these people. So I saw their work, I saw them doing movies. I also participated when I was a kid with Amílcar Tirado in some of the movies that he did for DIVEDCO, he

needed extra. When he ever needed children, he says, “Oh, I need children, Nitza, come!” You know what I mean? Or whatever.

So all that part is really exciting and it’s really great, but what happens is that, you growing up, and you wanted to do your own thing, sometimes it’s good, sometimes it’s not so good, because then you don’t have much of a challenge for yourself, you know what I mean? That’s why I show challenge in this sense. Everything that you do is good, you know what I mean? No. You need more challenge. So that’s why I decided not to stay and go to school at the University of Puerto Rico or at the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, where Dr. Ricardo Alegría wanted me to go to school at their school, because I knew everybody. I knew all the teachers, they were great, they were fantastic. My mentor was always Lorenzo Homar, and Lorenzo Homar always say, “No no no, stay in New York, you’re doing great. You’re doing commission. Whenever you feel like an itch, you want to come to Puerto Rico, go see the mountains and the sea, and then go back to the States,” because there’s more opportunity here, you know what I mean?

Q: You know so much in that your mom was one of the—

Tufiño: She was a model.

Q: A model and a Frido.

Tufiño: And she was part of the Fridos with Frida Kahlo [Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón]. Frida Kahlo had a group of—and also Alberto Beltrán [García], all these artists who

met every Saturday in *La Casa Azul* [The Blue House], where Frida used to live. And they used to have charlas, like a salon. All those things are very, very important. These days, today, we don't do that. I think it should happen, artists should open up their homes and have more conversation with young people, and older artists, you know what I mean, to talk about different things that are happening in society, because from that, you know, you create programs, you create these ideas, you know? It's a challenge. When you work too much by yourself on your own, and you're not with other people discussing things and seeing challenging, even if the ideas are opposite to your ideas, but it sometimes is good to listen, because you never know how one from one side, the other one can be the opposite side, and then maybe create something. Only through dialogue is where things can get better, you know, and especially in the artist, you know, looking at artist's work, compositions, you know, getting together with other artists—they used to have this in Puerto Rico, you know?

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: They used to have, like, the Figueroas will have concerts in their homes sometimes. I remember that there was also the Tiós, also, like Lola Rodríguez [Dolores Rodríguez de Astudillo y Ponce de León] family, Lola Rodríguez de Tiós, Elsa [Tió], Elsita, all of that, all those things are very, very important. Here in El Barrio when we started Taller Boricua, that it came from, you know, it was during the time, so the Young Lords, so what happened, seeing there was no housing, their medical conditions were very bad, education, all of those things. And Taller was a group of artists, they invited my father. Carlos Osorio was part of that, too, in 1969. I was coming back from Mexico, so I went to visit my father over here at—Taller used to be, at

111 and Madison Avenue, across from the Young Lords. And I got there, and I had all these great ideas. And the guys asked me, "Oh, we want you to be"—they asked my father, "Can she be part of the"—"Yes," he says, "but you've got to ask her, you can't ask me." You know, I said, "Yes, I want to be part of it," you know?

Q: What did that moment mean to you?

Tufiño: It was wonderful, because actually they were all male. I was the only woman. But you have to understand that this period, in the '60s, 1969, '68, '67, being a woman is very difficult for woman—like, there were other women, maybe, that wanted to be part of it, but they couldn't be part of it because of the education. Oh, how am I going to be in there with all of these Bohemian? They're artists, you know? Sometimes we used to have wine at night. Sometimes—you understand what I'm saying? They were all male. You know what I mean? The dynamics, you know, the dynamics that happens. And to me, I was so used to it because I grew up in it, you know what I mean, that it was great for me.

Q: You fit right in. Yes.

Tufiño: Yes, I fit right in when I want to be with the poets, that's how I met Pedro Pietri, Papoleto [Jesús Papoleto Meléndez], you know what I mean, and then people used to come visit us from everywhere. And my dad and Carlos Osorio helped the Young Lords get all those posters that they had on the outside. They were posters from DIVEDCO, División de Educación

de la Comunidad, that were done in Puerto Rico. And they had the company give them a bunch of posters so they could put it outside of their offices, you know what I mean?

So and then there was also Marcos. I'm still working with Marcos Dimas, Marcos, Adrián [García], and all of that. So it was a very—it was like a period of Renaissance.

Q: I was just going to—I was thinking of that word, just, like, artistic and, like, Renaissance, right, of social justice.

Tufiño: It's the beginning of social justice. You know? It was all social justice.

Q: You mean—so much of your—I mean, you're a public artist. You are deeply engaged in community, you have been for decades. What role did art play—specifically you mentioned the Young Lords, and how El Taller was right across the street from the Young Lords' office, right there.

Tufiño: Right.

Q: On 111th [Street]. What was that collaboration like? How did you see your role, you know, working with the Young Lords, or just in general?

Tufiño: Well, mainly—mainly, we were not, I mean, like, like, when they had the offenses for the garbage, you know what I mean, we would be out there. We saw how they kill some of the—

like, Julio Roldan was killed, apprehended and taken to the jail, and then how he was killed, also. We had one member from Taller, Tito Pérez [Martín "Tito" Pérez] who was also—we went to an exhibit and then he got in with Jorge Soto, they got into a thing with the transit police inside the train station. And then they were taken to 125th Street, and then the next day he was dead, you know? So why? He didn't have no reasons to kill himself.

So that was, like, the beginning of—we see what happening with Floyd [*phonetic*], with all these things that are happening, you know, that was part of—but also it has to do that we got a big mouth, you know? People are not afraid. So if you're not afraid, you'll speak up. And if you speak up and they don't like what you're saying, and they feel that they are the authority. If you want to stay alive, then you got to do what they tell you to do, and you've got to stay shut, which is very hard emotionally, because when you being abused and abused and abused through housing, through not getting the right type of housing, through—and you see what's happening with your people, you have to be very, very careful.

So as an artist, I'm glad that I always chose that I had to fight either the pen or the brush, I didn't have to pick up a rifle. But a lot of them, Marcos went to the war in Vietnam. Carlos Osorio was part of the Second World War. My father was part of the Second World War.

Q: You mentioned that your father had—went to—served in the Second World War.

Tufiño: Yes, Second World War. He was in Panama watching the—he knew of all the airplanes. He used to report of the airplanes that used to come in through the Panama Canal, you know? So

a lot of people, even Lorenzo Homar, he got the Purple Heart because he saved somebody, and this was in Korea. So, you know, these are all acts of violence, you go through that and then you're supposed to come back to society and behave properly, you know what I mean? Take the uniform off—then if you see things that are wrong with your country or, you know, all of that, then it becomes very, very hard for you emotionally to stay put and not say anything, and not open your mouth, you know what I'm saying?

Q: Is your art work a way for you to open your mouth and say something?

Tufiño: Yes, well, in a way, yes. I always thought that if I do my paintings and I do things like that, I could do it, and if I have a chance to do some posters, or I have a chance to do whatever, it's one way to canalize that energy, and also to teach it to other young people, to be artistic in that sense, and to do those things. That's why you have graffiti. You have graffiti people go out there and they do graffiti, it might look good, it might look bad, but it's a form of expression, you know? People want to express themself, and they'll find a way how to say it, if they don't do it through the arts and paints, and stuff like that. They do it through the words, through acting, through theater, you know, acting up, you know what I mean, doing a play and stuff like that. And I think a lot of the young people need that. They need to have it in the schools, so that it becomes a part, math, English, whatever, second language, whatever, it's an integral part of the curriculum because it's part of themselves. And you let them, how do we say, emotionally canalize those idea, and then put them into words.

Q: Yes. Something I wanted to ask you about is, you know, you have described yourself in the past as both an artist and an activist, you know? You're from—you know, you were one of the founders of El Museo del Barrio.

Tufiño: That too, that too.

Q: There's so much you've—

Tufiño: Yes, I consider myself, I don't know, a creative revolutionary. I'm a creative revolutionary.

Q: I was going to ask you, how do you describe yourself, right?

Tufiño: Yes, well, I'm a creative revolutionary artist because I use the creativity to create the revolution. You could create a humanistic revolution. You could create all kinds of things, but you've got to use the creative mind to do that; create the ideas, the emotion, the anger, the happiness.

Q: Deliberation.

Tufiño: And then through that you liberate yourself, your spirit, you know what I mean? Because at least you're feeling that you're moving forward and you're trying to change things. The whole point is, changing yourself—you know, if you want the world to change, you've got to start with

yourself. That's number one. Don't expect other people to change if you don't change. The change happens with you. Once it starts happening with you, then you can let it go outside there and with others, and then you start changing things in the world, you know what I'm saying? But in the creative process, it's very, very important to unite, to listen, and to create positive things, positive paintings for society. Like, I look at, for example, some of the paintings that I've been doing the past few years about my family, because I'm thinking of the future when I'm no longer here, what am I—what's going to be my legacy? What am I leaving my children, my grandchildren, or my society?

Q: Are you thinking about that right now?

Tufiño: Huh?

Q: That's something that you're spending time thinking about? Your legacy? It's wonderful.

Tufiño: Yes, because it's important. My legacy's my people's legacy, you know? My Puerto Ricanness, my Mexican, my humanistic is very, very important. And if I can choose something of my life that I did change in my life, and I could show it to make somebody tickle and see themself, and I could help them change through some of my work, fantastic. Then I did touch somebody. To me, those things are very important.

Q: Can I ask you a question about when you're making? You talk so much about your family's roots on your mother's side, and in particular on your father's side in Puerto Rico; how your

great grandmother was enslaved, and your African roots and your Taíno roots, and the spirituality traditions in your family, the Yoruba, so many of the different deities. Who is in the room with you when you're making? Spiritually, emotionally—

Tufiño: Well, sometimes, like, you know my great grandmother, because I saw her when I was very young, and sometimes she—because she was very, very old and very fragile. She used to come out crying out of nowhere, I would say, "Grandma, grandma, *abuelita*! Why are you crying?" She says, "Because I see the men *flageando* [battering]" her father, you understand, when they used to beat them, or when they did anything like that and she was a child. So but then those are things then you erase like that, and usually you don't ask any more questions, you know what I mean? But I never felt any anger. What I felt was sorrow. I felt very bad for her, you know what I mean, even though now she, you know, she still had all those things in her head, and that—

Q: What was her name?

Tufiño: Juanita. Juanita Rodriguez. [*phonetic*]. Juanita Rodriguez.

Q: And that's in this painting?

Tufiño: That's her. That's Juanita Rodriguez, right here. That's her.

Q: Where Anita showed me—what's the name of this painting?

Tufiño: *Nuestro Pueblo* [Our people].

Q: *Nuestro Pueblo*. And when did you paint this?

Tufiño: This was done for El Centro [CentroPR, Center for Puerto Rican Studies]?.

Q: I think it says "2012."

Tufiño: Yes. Yes.

Q: But Nitza showed me this mural that she did, this painting that she did of a family portrait.

Tufiño: You think of us. Yes.

Q: A very, very beautiful family portrait of your father when he was ten, when he was young, around ten years old with his side of the family, his grandmother, his mother and some of his other family members. And in the middle of this really stunning mural is your great grandmother, Juanita.

Tufiño: Yes, because I feel that she is the one, *es la matriarca* [she is the matriarch] from the whole family. There will not—

Q: She's the matriarch.

Tufiño: The matriarch of the whole family. And she love her grandchildren. And the thing is that, the first comer, my grandmother and my uncle, Pablo and Goyita were the first ones to come to the States. And that's where she met her husband, Agustín Tufiño. My father was never born, even though they call him "painter of the people" by Teresa Tió in Puerto Rico, he was born in the Navy yard in Brooklyn.

Q: And your family came over, you said, what—

Tufiño: In 1917.

Q: Which is significant.

Tufiño: It's significant because they travel on the *Marine Tiger*, the boat. And those are—they used to travel on boat, not on airplanes.

Q: That's right, in 1917—

Tufiño: Yes, and then she used to come. And then during that time, that's when already we come through the Jones Act American citizens, but really they don't have the papers, and he needs papers to work in the States. So the federal administration had an office, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico had an office. You have to go get your papers there. So my grandfather, that's where

I found his papers. That El Centro had them, because they had given it to them. So that's why I decided to do the painting, because when a lot of the people came from Puerto Rico, mainly from the countryside, they were trying—already industrialization was going to come into Puerto Rico, they were not going to be in the farmland anymore, so they came to the States.

Q: But you grew up—when you were living in Puerto Rico when you were very, very young, you grew up around San Juan. But where were your family members, they did not come from San Juan, they came from the countryside, you said?

Tufiño: Well, some of them came from Trujillo Alto. And she lived in La Perla. She lived in La Perla, okay, because when my father used to go travel and be with her, he would go through La Perla, not San Juan.

Q: Nitza's pointing to—

Tufiño: My father here, over here.

Q: Your father, and then also your father's great, great grandmother.

Tufiño: La Perla, see, they used to go—like, this is a photograph of them here in the States; you see how he's dressed, they're all dressed like dandies, you know what I'm saying, because the Puerto Ricans, you know, during that period, they started forming the clubs. They had the Ostos [*phonetic*] Club, and they used to dance, danza and all of that. That's how my father learned

about the culture. And then he used to travel to visit his great grandmother, who used to stay in La Perla, but then when The Depression came during the ’30s, they had to go back to Puerto Rico to live. And that’s when he went back to Puerto Rico.

Q: And you said, when you’re making, you hear her voice, Juanita.

Tufiño: I always hear her voice because she was very—I was very close with her when I was a kid, and my grandmother. I always been very, very close to them, more, you know, yes, close to my mother, but more to my great, great grandmother and grandmother, you know?

Q: What do you—is there a beautiful memory that you have with your grandmother and your great, great grandmother?

Tufiño: Well, you know, they always, you know, I remember, you know, my birthday parties, you know. They used to dress me up, and the cakes and all of that. It used to be on the patio outside, which was nice, you know. Me wanting to do my little drawings and stuff like that, when I was a little kid, and I see all those papers you have here, I love to tear paper, like, collage. I love to do a lot of collage.

Q: What do you love about collage?

Tufiño: The tearing and the sound of the paper.

Q: Hmm.

Tufiño: And looking for images that have to do with history or not history, maybe some drawings that I have done in my head with the colors and stuff like that. The thread on the sewing machine, you know, my family, you know, sitting down and doing dresses.

Q: That's a beautiful Singer. Singer sewing machine, that's a vintage.

Tufiño: Yes.

Q: Beautiful. Beautiful.

Tufiño: Yes, it's real. So all of those things, this is like coming back home. Coming back home, and, you know, it reminds you of home all the time, you know what I mean? And home is home to everybody, because everybody has their home, and it's the same sense that they have for being close to the family, you know? Even the closeness, you know, or getting together, listening to Puerto Rico to the *trovador* [troubadour], you know. Even when you go to the countryside, I used to go a lot to the countryside. I even had a cow. Her name was Rita [*phonetic*] in Manatí, you know? They asked me when I was—you know, if I wanted a pet, a dog? I said, "No, I want a cow." [*Laughter*] So I had my cow. That's me with my cow.

Q: Nitza has these incredible photos spread all over her table for a project that she's working on right now. But here's a photo, hopefully we can include it in Nitza's archive of Nitza standing in the countryside with a cow behind her. These are really stunning almost sepia tone photos.

Tufiño: So you see, this is one of my father's painting. This is me, that is for my birthday. But this is one of my paintings.

Q: Wow! That's incredible. These are incredible photos, Nitza. I hope we can include them in your archive.

Tufiño: Yes, I will, I'll make copies and I'll give them to you so you can have some.

Q: I would love that.

Tufiño: So this is how you grow up, you know? This is in Manatí, actually, you know, in Manatí, you know, with the pineapples? They had the pineapples. We used to go running around the things, you know, where the pineapple was, with some of the kids that have the houses around there, and we used to grab the guayabas. That was some great times, you know what I mean, when I was a kid. Now you can't do that. But remember, in all of this thing, it has the nice flavor of the island, you know how you grew up, home, you know. And you get no static about it, but you want to bring it about and you want to show people, you know, not to forget it.

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: Like, you said your mother is from Adjuntas, picking coffee. People get up at 3:00 in the morning, they go through the mountain, they start picking up the coffee, then they bring it down. And there's a couple of places in Puerto Rico, even today, near Adjuntas they have, that you could go see how [*unclear*] *de la hacienda* [from the farm].

Q: De las haciendas, yes.

Tufiño: You see the whole hacienda, and you see how people used to live, and all of that, and the coffee. And we're still drinking coffee, you know, so you walk in with the coffee, you know.

Q: Yes, I know. But I was drinking—

Tufiño: Smelling the coffee, and all that. That's Puerto Rico, man! That's Puerto Rico, the grinding of the coffee, you know what I mean?

Q: I have a question.

Tufiño: And then—uh-huh?

Q: I have a few questions. I would love to talk about this painting, *Nuestro Pueblo*, that you painted of—

Tufiño: *Nuestro Pueblo*, yes.

Q: *Nuestro Pueblo* that you painted of your family, because there's other family members here. But before I ask that, what makes you feel most boricua mexicana? You're both.

Tufiño: Well, the thing is that, I discover, through my art work, that in certain—like even those that you see over there, those different semis [*phonetic*], this is a big project that I did for LaGuardia Community College. I did a frieze for the library. And these are all semis, you know, the gods. Those are our gods. And I remember when I was with El Museo del Barrio that we were trying to bring all this, because the whole thing is, the museums here were not exhibiting our stuff, but they had them. Like, the Museum of Natural History had them, the Museum Americana, the Indian had it. Even in the Peabody Museum, you know? And we were fighting, that was the whole thing with El Museo del Barrio. I mean, Ralph [Raphael] Montañez was the one that did the incorporation papers for the Board of Education, because that was a museum that was made through the Board of Ed. But the people that fought like hell to get the money for that, what happened were the parents of the people in El Barrio. People in El Barrio, like, people don't realize that most of the people that came from Puerto Rico that came from the countryside were also being educated during the '50s by Muñoz Marín, when they had División de Educación de la Comunidad, because they used to do a collective, the social work, going to the countryside and then they would talk about the problems and this and that, and they tried to fix some of the problems they had, whether they had problem with water, or that they needed a bridge—that's how they got the artists together to do film and to write some of the scripts for the film, and to do some more booklets, there were some more booklets. Those people were organized and were

thought, so when they were coming out of the countryside into the States to go work in the farmland in Jersey, or be here, and even they went out to New Orleans, Hawaii and all of that—those people were already trained by Muñoz Marín through DIVEDCO, to understand, why was it a dictatorship? What was the understand—all those things. So here you have people in El Barrio fighting that they want an educational program for the children that—where they can go and learn about their culture.

Q: Hmm.

Tufiño: What is their culture? Their culture is our Taíno Indians, our African Afro *herencia* [heritage], our Spanish herencia because we speak Spanish literature, that they should be bilingual? We were Puerto Ricans, were the ones that fought for all of that. And the biggest one that really pushed them were the Young Lords.

So all of that is during the time of—

Q: The energy.

Tufiño: —the Renaissance. The energy was coming about because people were realizing this is what I want for my children, this is looking into the future, you know what I mean? So El Museo comes about *también* [as well], you know, the Young Lords, Taller Boricua, El Museo del Barrio comes about. They're—yes, okay, so we have to be inclusive of others, because why have inclusive of other culture because we're Spanish-speaking. So now we're including also Latin

America, you know what I mean? We're including the Caribbean, the Caribbean, you understand?

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: Because we're—even though we know Afro-descendencia in the United States, we are not the same, we come from the slave and all of that, but we have our Spanish culture, and we have the Spanish-speaking.

Q: And the migration.

Tufiño: And migration, all of that. So it's different. Migration, right.

Q: Speaking of migration and diaspora, going just because I think it relates to what we're talking about, this—

Tufiño: So this is a diasporas, right? When I did this painting that you see here, you know—

Q: We're referencing *Nuestro Pueblo*, which we were talking about earlier, yes.

Tufiño: Right. When I did this and I referenced it to my family, my family is just the same like your family, everybody else's family, that you have to—you look at mine, look at yours, and you start putting it together. And then I realized, well, I got to put my mom, because my mom was

Mexican, and she came into the States, right? Then I have here Pedro Pietri, who wrote—the poet who did the Puerto Rican obituary, okay?

Q: Yes. Obituary, yes.

Tufiño: Then I put myself there also because I'm the artist that's doing the painting and all of that, it's the little face over there. I don't know the—

Q: Where's Pedro?

Tufiño: This is Pedro. Little Pedro.

Q: Wow.

Tufiño: I don't know if here, let me see if here there's another bigger—oh, here it is. Now we can see it better.

Q: Oh, okay. Here's a bigger version of it that we can really see.

Tufiño: Okay. So anyway, so here you have—and then you have my partner, Rafaela, she's—and the three little angels, three little angels, because number three is the creation, el número tres es la creación. So Ronny [Rafaela] is telling the story. And here you have Rita Moreno with her Oscar, and all the things that she did when she came, you know, in the theater. This Eva de La O,

who did *música de cámara* [chamber music], and then we are with our los Reyes Magos, because we brought los Reyes Magos with us, The Three Kings, okay? We always take them wherever we go. And then over here, I have this of El Morro in old San Juan, but if you look at it, la Puerta de San Juan with the Door of San Juan is backwards. I put it backwards. Instead of you looking at it this way, you looking at it backwards. Why? Because Puerto Rico is backwards. It's a colony. It has a lot of contradictions.

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: It has a lot of things that we got to hash out, so everything is backwards. So it's sort of like the ear of social justice, you know? You have to look at the painting and all of that.

Q: There's so many details here.

Tufiño: So there's a lot of details and things like that. And then over here, you have la Plaza de San Juan [Plaza de Armas de San Juan] in Old San Juan, which is called la Plaza de Armas, okay? And—

Q: Armas, not Almas.

Tufiño: No, no. What happened, I'll tell you a story about that, and then you got the Eagle, the United States. Then you have here the esoterics, you know, the sun and all of that, this is a friend of mine, she's a designer. Very supportive of our work, Deana Funt [*phonetic*]. And then this is

Marcos Dimas from Taller Boricua. This is Nicholasa Mohr, the writer. These are the Hermanas Antonietti [*phonetic*], who were very important in putting José [Enrique] Serrano in Congress. Also, in the library, Lillian López was part of the library, she worked with Pura Belpré. And Antonietti also [*unclear*], also they revolutionize in the Bronx the politics. Rafael Hernández [Marín], the composer, because he wrote *Campanitas de cristal*. When he was living in the States, *Campanitas de cristal* are the icicles. The icicles. And then this is Fernando Salicrup, director of Taller Boricua, he passed away. This is the first Congresswoman, Nydia Velázquez. Our [Sonia] Sotomayor, Margarita López, the councilwoman who later became Housing Commissioner, and Cesar [Augusto] Perales, who is half Dominican and half Puerto Rican. And why the bubbles? Because bubble is air, if this is air, the earth, we're sort of, like, moving up, we're moving up. This is all the different things that I thought about it when I did it.

Q: This is—you know, when I first saw on the previous page, it was just actually an excerpt of the mural, and this is the full thing. And it's really what I thought was a family portrait is really a personal and political portrait. You know, we talked about home, this massive painting, this mural, it really captures so much of your personal and political and cultural influences in a really diasporic way.

Tufiño: Because we are diasporas, you know what I mean? And we brought all that information, and we're taking back all that information. And we also have the other side, the other side, well, you know, the other side is the Mexican side, you know, on my mother's part, about all this on the other. But you see here, mira, you see the picture of my—this is my grandfather that I put over here.

So anyway, I did it with that purpose, you know? And I call it *Nuestro Pueblo*, where *Nuestro Pueblo*—and then I don't have with me here, you know, but one day maybe—maybe we take it to Columbia and show it in Columbia.

Q: I would love that.

Tufiño: I mean, that would be nice.

Q: I would love that.

Tufiño: But I did it because actually, by looking out—and also the technique that I used to do the painting, I did it on purpose because most of the historical gray paintings that have been done by the murals that Diego Rivera did that are in Mexico, even my father thinks he's in Puerto Rico. Even Tamayo [*phonetic*], all these, you know, Siqueiros [David Alfaro Siqueiros], you know, the Mexicans, which I actually met Siqueiros in Mexico when I was going to school. So, you know, I said if I do this, I have to do something that is really great and magnificent that will stay for history, you know what I mean, that become a stamp, that people can really look at it and that for all the other cultures to look at it and to look at us—

Q: Right.

Tufiño: —you know what I mean? They said, "*Espérate, impecable* [Wait, this is impeccable]. *Está bien hecho* [It's well done]. *Está bien pensado* [It's well thought out]. This is for my people."

Q: And it shines through all of your work, your love for your people, and your love for your culture and all of the roots of your culture, the African roots, the Taíno roots, the Spanish influence as well, your Mexican roots. I sort of guess I'm curious as to, there are ways in which other people describe your work, and there's ways that you describe your work.

Tufiño: I know some people—you know, like, you know what, I don't hear much about, you know, like, I don't hear much about. Sometimes if I see a curator or something and I see, oh yeah, I go over and I ask, "Well, okay, you tell me what you think," or, "Tell me"—

Q: Yes, what you see.

Tufiño: —"whatever, whatever you see," you know. They say, "Oh, great, this and the other"—you know, fine. But that I haven't heard anybody, you know, maybe in the future, I don't know.

Q: Do you think your—

Tufiño: Mauro [*phonetic*] is one, Mauro from El Museo, and Susanna Temkin, you know, they come here and they see this and they see that, and then they want to take "Oh, I want this on El Museo," I say, "Here, take it for El Museo." You know? Because I believe sometimes that it

should be there, you know what I mean, because for the future, you know what I'm saying? But that I heard whatever, it's still like a struggle, you know what I'm saying?

Q: You think that more attention needs to be paid to women painters?

Tufiño: Women artists.

Q: Women artists. Yes.

Tufiño: It's not—I don't see that much respect or greatness, you know what I'm saying? It's always the male, the male, the male. The women, they work, they take care of the children, and then they do the work also. They're in charge of everything, and it's time for all of these things—it's hard to have children, get up early in the morning, get them ready, take them to school.

Q: Were there other—

Tufiño: Bring them back when they get sick, you know, people don't think about that.

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: And then you create all of this, when do you have the time to do that? Who babysits for you, when you have to—who, who who? What? Do you know what I mean? Through the years, you know what I mean? It's hard for a woman, it's so hard. So hard.

Q: Were there other Puerto Rican women, Dominican women, Mexican women artists when you were coming up, when you were working at El Taller and El Museo del Barrio, were there other women that you were in community—other women, other Puerto Rican artists that you were in community with?

Tufiño: Yes, but—yes, that were working or doing—yes, there were some, like—I'm trying to think, you know? Because some of the women, other artists, sometimes they decide that maybe they don't have children. And they decide to be in their careers. Some males now in their 40s, 50s, they say, we'll, if I'm going to be—it's very hard to pay the rent—

Q: Did you feel like you were the only one?

Tufiño: You know what it is? I didn't care if I was the only one, or whatever. I just knew that I had to do it, that I had an inner situation within me that I always found the time, and I taught my children, either they go with me to the studio and they will be artists, too, because they will have their place with their stuff, or I would bring the TV. I mean, I did whatever I had to do so that the kids could be with me all the time.

Q: Wow.

Tufiño: My daughter, I have pictures with my daughter in the studio. I could send some of those for you guys.

Q: I would love that.

Tufiño: You know, school, you know, all of that. But never had time—they don't have much time. Yes, sometimes I want to go to a disco and maybe have a good time dancing at night, or who's going to take care of my kid?

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: Who's going to get her up early in the morning to take her to school the next day, if I have a job, and then at the same time I got to do the art work? It's hard. It's hard when you're raising children by yourself, because eventually you get divorced, or whatever. Does the man—you know, I mean, it's either you put into their career, they don't put much into your career. It's very hard. Think about that. Usually mostly the woman. If the man is studying to be a doctor, the woman kills herself so they become a doctor. Once they become the doctor, they get divorced, and she [*unclear*], and he gets somebody else, you know what I mean?

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: It's very difficult. Then later on, you know what I mean, because I don't know—how would I say it—I had a lot of friends that were gay, like the owners of the garage, very good friends. I don't know if you remember the disco thing, they had the garage, they died of AIDS. They had to be—Keith Haring used to be there, used to do a lot of their stuff for them. But besides people that you know and their friends, you know, you have maybe dinner at home and stuff like that. But I didn't have much of a chance to be out there, you know what I mean? Even when I was with Nuyorican Poets Cafe, with Miguel, Agarin [*phonetic*] and Pedro Pietri and, you know—

Q: Sandra [Maria] Esteves.

Tufiño: You know, Sandy Esteves was up there during that time, but she didn't have kids yet. But later on she started having kids. Then she started as a visual artist, and then she just switched over to poetry.

Q: Wow. I didn't know that.

Tufiño: Sandy, yes, Sandy started as a visual artist. Another one that's very good is Nancy Mercado.

Q: Yes. Yes.

Tufiño: Nancy is fantastic.

Q: Wonderful.

Tufiño: I admire her because, like, she comes from Ponce for a very—her family was from Ponce, but she lived in Atlantic City. And I think Pedro was a big mentor to her, too. She's [*unclear*], she went to school, she did her doctorate. And I admire, but you know what, she doesn't have any children—good for her, you know what I mean? I mean, it's been tough living alone herself to do her portrait.

Q: I mean, you're talking a lot about the balances that women artists have to, you know—

Tufiño: Decisions.

Q: —decisions that women artists have to have made and continue to make, and certain things have changed, and other things haven't changed enough. I mean, we talked about your artistic homes, you know, going to school in Mexico City, coming up in Puerto Rico, also in El Taller and El Museo del Barrio, I wanted also—we'd also talked about your personal lineage.

Tufiño: Yes.

Q: But we started, at the beginning of the interview, you mentioned your partner, Ronny, who I'm really excited to talk to after we finish this interview, I'm going to get a chance to talk to Ronny. Can you share, you know, you said you were previously married twice.

Tufiño: Right, right.

Q: You've had children, and when I invited you to this, to do this interview focusing on the stories of Latina lesbians over 50 years old, and gay women, and—

Tufiño: Well, my friend, Margarita López, the councilwoman, very good friend. We went to school together. And she's openly gay. And also there was Pantoja, who was in theater and all of that.

Q: Antonio?

Tufiño: Antonio Pantoja, yes. He was—you know, we were in the same age school, elementary, the three of us. And they were both later on gay, you know what I mean, and I was straight, right? She was a councilwoman, and Ronny was working with her, running her office here in the Lower East Side, because Ronny has had many things, you know what I mean? And Margarita presented me to her, and I met her, and all of that, then I said, "Oh, we will go out for breakfast," or, "We'll do lunch," this and the other. And I found her again, and I found myself many, many time asking her for advice on things, you know? Legal things, about this and that, and also about painting, about all kinds of—and she was so great, so fantastic, that I started gearing to her, you know what I mean? And I found myself, like, I was calling her all the time. And I used to go to Puerto Rico, and then I will call her from Puerto Rico, wherever she was, and she would give me advice, and this. And I kept asking myself, you know, I mean, what is this thing that attracts me,

and that I'm geared to her all the time, you know what I mean? I said at one point, you know, a couple of months had gone by, I started asking myself, what's going on? I'm, like, I don't understand it myself, you know what I mean? And one—I was in Puerto Rico doing some show for my father, or something, and I was very good friends with Darlene [*phonetic*] too, Darlene who was the head of the gay thing in Puerto Rico. I forgot her last name, but her name is Darlene. And I was with Darlene, and all of that. And I'm always with all these gay, you know, nice woman, fighter, activist, this and the other. And then all of a sudden, I keep doing this, and I call her one day from Puerto Rico, and I say, "Hey, I'm in Puerto Rico. I'm in this bar called Yo No Sé Si Bau [*phonetic*]," *qué sé ni cuánto.* She said, "Oh, can you bring me some sandwiches for the staff?" Because she thought I was in Delancey Street. I says, "No no no, I'm in Puerto Rico." She said, "Okay, when I go back, I will look it up," and all of that. And then—

[END OF FILE A]

[BEGIN OF FILE B]

Tufiño: Another time I meet her at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, I was with my father. They were celebrating my father's birthday. I said, "Oh, why don't you come over, they're celebrating my father's birthday," and all of that. And everybody was there. And it kept going in my head, what's going on with me and Ronny, you know what I mean? And then I said, "Ronny, why don't we go out on a date?" And she looked at me, like, "What?" [*Laughter*] She said, "Are you crazy?" She said to me—I said, "Ronny," I said, "Why don't we go out on a date?" And they go, "But we're

here, we're having this—what kind of date? What are you talking about?" Didn't understand, because here I am, a straight woman, and she's gay, and she's out lesbian, right? And she said, "I can't go out with you out on a date. You're a straight woman." And I said to her, "What's that got to do with anything?" [*Laughter*] I said, "Ronny, what's that got to do with anything? What are you telling me, that I'm a straight woman? I don't know what you're telling me, I don't understand it." And she said to me that, "What I'm telling you is that you are the one that's going to break my heart." She says to me, there on the table. And she says, I say, "What do you mean, I'm going to break your heart? I'm only asking you for a date. Let's go out on a date. Let's go out," you know, just—I don't know, this is me in my head—

Q: When was this?

Tufiño: That's, like, she knows the date. She knows the date. Like, in 2001? Two thousand, around—after Nine Eleven, it was right after—because that's when she moved back. And she was working with Margarita—

Q: So this is over twenty years ago.

Tufiño: Yes, so we've been together twenty years. So then I go, "Okay, let's go out on a date." "Oh, listen, you're going to break my heart. I can't get too close, this is it," because she liked me. She liked me. And we got along really great, you know, about things, we talk, and this and the other. And she said, "No no no, you're going to break my heart." And I say, "Why?" "You're a straight woman, you're going to go out with men." I said, "I'm not going out with anyone. I'm

not going out with no men. Not interested," you know what I'm saying? "I just got divorced, I'm not interested." I said, matter of fact, I was planning to sell my house, and my son was going to school, my daughter was doing something else. And I was going to go to France, live there for a while with the money that I had from the house and all of that, because I was planning, you know, one of those dreams being a painter in France or something like that, some kind of pushing in my head, you know?

Q: Well, James Baldwin went to Paris, yes.

Tufiño: You know, I said, you know, okay, maybe I'll do that. So I called the realtor—I was going to do all of that. And then I got involved with Ronny. I got involved with her, and for New Year's Eve, we decided, okay, whatever. And then I said, "Okay, I'm going to change my life." I say, "Why don't you come and live with me," I said, "Come and live with me in Jersey." "In Jersey, aha," you know what I mean? "It's too far away, I'm in New York." I said, "Oh, you're going to love it. You're going to love it." I said, "Okay, so I'm going to stop the sale of the house, I'm going to stop everything. Come with me, and then we'll start a relationship," and all of that. She said, "Okay, fine, let's see how it goes." And then she said, "Okay, so I'm going to get in Garden State for Equality," who is an organization that's starting. I forgot [*unclear*] Goldstein. And I'm going to fight for marriage, so she can marry me. So I said, "Great!" To me, I don't—you know, crazy, you know. So I said, "Great," blah blah blah, this, that and the other.

And then all of that, and then Margarita also, she gave us the blessing, she said, "Oh, you've got to talk to your children, you've got to come out of the closet. You can't"—how am I saying

that—"keep it quiet." She said to me, "If you're going to be with her, you have to be with her and you have to be out of the closet." And I said, "What are you talking about, me being out of the closet?" You know? And she said, "Well, you've got to be open and you've got to say how you feel about her, just like your other partners that you had," and all of that. "And you have to tell your children so they get to accept her as a family member and as a mom," and all of that. "And there's no confusion." I say, "Well, why all of that?" And she said, "Because she's an activist, and she's an out lesbian, big mouth," you know what I mean? "And you're not going to look right." When you stand next to her, it's, like, okay, she's with her, but she's not coming out, do you know what I'm saying?

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: Like, that doesn't look good in society, you know, like, you've got to be together.

Q: What did you think?

Tufiño: Me?

Q: How were you feeling at the time, about that?

Tufiño: As long as my children said okay, I didn't have a problem. But as soon as I told my father and my side of the family, homophobia came about, you know what I mean?

Q: Really?

Tufiño: Yes. So homophobia came about, but then as I went on, whatever I try, I try whatever, I try, see, they say no, but there were other issues, you know what I mean? And then they attack me with a lasso about my father and his art work, because I have taken his art work, which is a lie. You know, like, they tried to use it so that they can keep whatever they wanted out of my father's estate, because I'm the oldest, and I always was the one that made things happening. I mean, I feel bad, but since I have Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which is a great practice, I told everybody they should practice Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as the eye. And I go to meetings and I still need a lot of Sutra, [*unclear*], I understood that it's a lot of karma. It could have been all karma that I had that I needed to change, or karma, things that I needed to do so that I could change things in the world. So that's how—how would I say—how I did it for myself, because otherwise you will be devastated, you know what I mean? Like I know longer have the family that I had before, you know what I mean, and my children, we're disconnected totally. We're totally disconnected.

Q: Who?

Tufiño: Me, from my brothers—these are half-brothers.

Q: From your—

Tufiño: From my father's side, because my mother passed away, my mother never had other children. Okay? And my mother never knew about this, you know what I mean?

Q: Really?

Tufiño: She never knew that I—because I never did, you know what I'm saying? This just happened with me and Ronny.

Q: Oh, so she passed before you were with—before you were with Ronny.

Tufiño: Yes, in '87. In '87.

Q: I'm sorry.

Tufiño: So to me, my son and my daughter were, like, great. They love Ronny, you know. We're a family. So to us, it's, like, the four of us, we're a family. And Ken got married, so his wife, you know, is part. I don't think beyond that. Then the way that I felt with people that knew me for many years that all said, "Oh, wait a second, she's with a woman now?" You know what I'm saying? So I don't care. That's their problem, not mine, you know what I'm saying?

Q: Yes, I guess I want to dig a little bit more, if you don't mind, into that, because, you know, when I invited you to be part of this conversation and I described it as oral histories about Latina

lesbians over fifty, how did you feel when I asked you? Because we had a conversation about this, and I'd love to revisit that.

Tufiño: Yes. Well, when you first told me, first I said, "First I have to discuss it with Ronny"—

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: —okay? But then I said to myself, you know what, this is good that it's happening, because it affirms me as a person to talk about it and to think about things, you know what I mean? My sexuality, how I feel about it, loving a woman. Then at the same time, like, I feel—there's really no difference, you know? Living life the way I had it before with a man or with a woman, it's the same thing, there's no difference. It's, like, doing the same thing, as in same kind of loving, except that I love Ronny even more, because Ronny with me has been so supportive. Much more than the males. Much more. I can't explain it, you know?

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: I love her, you know? I love her, and—

Q: There's a real connection.

Tufiño: Yes. And then the fact that she said, "Oh, I'm going to fight," and she made it happen with Goldstein in Garden State, all that fighting she did for same marriage, equality and for

people to get married and all of that. That was a plus. And she said that's the type of person she is, she's convincing. She says she's going to do something, she goes and she does it, you know what I mean? And she changed the world. She'll go, bam bam bam ba, and she goes—and politics is the same thing, when she gets involved in politics. And all the work that she's been doing, the time of AIDS during the '80s, and the fact she know, you know, [*unclear*], oh, she knows [Dr. Anthony Stephen] Fauci, you know? The Washington guy, I said, "Oh, she knows Fauci," you know? So you're near a person that, you know, she's a celebrity, you know what I'm saying? So it's not only me that I'm the artist, or whatever, you know?

So it's really exciting. I'm really excited that she's in my life now, that I go, whatever, or she goes, we're together and we're doing things. And she wants to do her movies, she does her poetry, she does fantastic. She does great poetry. You should see some poetry.

Q: I'm really excited to talk to her, yes.

Tufiño: Lesbian poetry, she's got some good stuff.

Q: I'm excited to talk to her about it.

Tufiño: She did a poem about—she did a poem for me, and one day she did it in front of a lot of people, and even the other poets were, like, "Ah!" [*Laughter*] I mean, so it's really great. And the fact that you invited me for this, I feel super-honored to be with all these other women that have done all this type of work, and that they're talking about their sexuality. And I hope that my life

feels as something for a young person to listen to it, that it will help them, you know what I mean?

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: Like, whoever you are, whatever you do, you know, if your best friend don't like it, or whatever—you have to like yourself. You have to confront yourself. You have to love yourself, you know what I mean? It doesn't matter who you love, what you love. It's you, you know what I mean? If people don't like you, well then, people don't like you. So what? Somebody else will like you, you know? One door closes, another one opens, you know what I mean?

Q: When you talked about your family—when we were talking about this before, we were recording, but you talked about how it was really difficult, and you talked about it some in this interview, but there was really—there was a lot of homophobia in your family.

Tufiño: Yes. Yes.

Q: And it was difficult, especially with your father.

Tufiño: Yes, with my father, they manipulated him. Because my father loved me—a lot of people know that. He loved me a lot and he was very proud of me with all the different things that I was doing in the arts. And we collaborate in projects together, when he was here, you know, with us in El Taller and all of that through the years, and every year that connection with

El Taller, coming to Taller, and all of that. So I was, like, you know, trying to understand, you know, why. You know what I'm saying? He loved me, and he wanted to be with me, and all the time he was with me and traveling and staying in my home when I was with a man, you know what I mean? And then all of a sudden this happened, and they tried to find a way to disinherit me with some bullshit, you know what I'm saying? Some kind of stories and all of that. They created something else to alienate me.

Q: That sounds really hard.

Tufiño: This is, like—well, it's like, you know, I understand it, because there's also a lot of jealousy. *Lo que se llama envidia de sangre* [This is what is called blood envy]. *¿Tú sabes lo que es envidia de sangre* [Do you know what blood envy is]?

Q: *No, dime* [No, tell me].

Tufiño: *Envidia de sangre es cuando* [Blood envy is when]—your DNA.

Q: Oh. Oh, yes. Yes.

Tufiño: DNA, okay, it's your DNA. So in this DNA, I'm the one that's doing this.

Q: Nitza's pointing to the paintings and the art.

Tufiño: You understand? In my family, I'm the one that's doing all of this. There are artists in my family, but I have to say it's not the same quality. I'm more closer to my father in that quality.

Q: Were you afraid to have that conversation with him?

Tufiño: With my father?

Q: When you met Ronny. I mean, just your whole life changed.

Tufiño: Yes. Yes.

Q: I mean, this is—

Tufiño: Like this.

Q: And you're not twenty, you're not thirty, you're not forty.

Tufiño: No. I'm seventy-four.

Q: At the time, though, you were, like, in your early 50s.

Tufiño: Exactly.

Q: You're grown, with kids. You've lived several lives. You have had already a long, well-known public career as an artist, and you meet Ronny.

Tufiño: Yes.

Q: And Ronny, it changes everything, it sounds like.

Tufiño: Exactly.

Q: It's, like, before Ronny, and after Ronny.

Tufiño: And after Ronny, exactly. And sometimes, you know, I feel for her too, because maybe she feels, oh, maybe, you know—maybe because she's with me, she caused all of this, and I forget about that. I pick you anytime, and I run away with you—you know, it's like the movies, you know what I mean?

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: Like when your parents don't accept you and they don't want you with someone, and you run away with the person and you never, ever—that's happening in a lot of love stories. You know what I mean?

Q: Is it fair to say, you know, because that's a lot to digest for anybody, right?

Tufiño: Yes.

Q: In any way, not just sexuality, but you know yourself and the people that know you, they know you in one way. And you grow and you change and you evolve.

Tufiño: Exactly.

Q: And you discover. It sounds like this was not something you ever saw coming.

Tufiño: Never. I never saw it coming. I can—I never saw it coming. Like I told you, I'm gravitating like a planet near this woman, and this and that, and I don't know what's happening, but I'm going that way, and I'm going that way, and I'm going to continue going that way. And I did it because those were my feelings, and I kept saying, you know, gee, man, my children are already old, you know? I don't have no little kids, you know what I mean? This is me. This is me, and I'm not going to deprive myself of love.

Q: Were you worried about how it would affect your career?

Tufiño: No, I didn't give a shit, because I didn't care. I didn't even care, my career—well, I'm not going—I think my work has gotten better.

Q: Woohoo!

Tufiño: I did that, now that I've been with Ronny. Listen, I'll tell you a story when I started doing that painting. My friends had a place in Antigua, Guatemala, right? I said, "You know what," I said, "how am I going to do this painting?" So I call her up, and she says to me, "Listen, I'm going to suggest to you, get your ass over here to Guatemala, you'll have everything, we'll feed you, watch this, and you don't need to worry about anything, just worry about doing the art." She did that. So I ask her, should I bring the materials? Should I bring my canvas, *esto, lo otro* [this one, the other one]," she said, "No, you don't need. We could go to the art supplies, they have everything in Guatemala. When I get to Guatemala and Antigua where she was, I had a huge studio.

Q: Wow.

Tufiño: She had people that could work with me, you know what I mean, cleaning up, preparing the palettes, everything, I would teach them how to do and all of that. I have somebody to feed me breakfast, lunch, they did my laundry, blah blah this, I don't have to worry about anything. I get over there, and I go to the art store, they don't have really what I needed. So who do I call? I call Ronny. "Ronny, you need to come to Guat, and buy this, this at the art supply store." She says, "I hate that country," because of the politics, you know what I mean? "Oh, I'm not going over there," blah blah, this. She said, "Okay." She went and she bought all the materials and the clothes, she put everything in a suitcase. She took a plane, she went to Guatemala, then we

picked her up and we took her to Antigua. And she left the next day, because she didn't want to stay there.

Q: Wow, that's a long flight!

Tufiño: Okay? A long flight, okay, to go to make it there, and then she brings me all the stuff.

Q: All your supplies, wow.

Tufiño: And I stayed there, I think, two months or something, or three months. And I do this, and then I pack it, and I bring it back, and I have a frame, and I show it.

Q: So what's the message—the message is, be gay, do better art? [*Laughter*]

Tufiño: Well, be gay, definitely be gay and be happy! Be gay and be happy. But understand and be responsible with the person that you're with also, you know what I'm saying?

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: But the fact is that, life—if you accept yourself and you accept your situation and you go that way because you feel good, nothing bad can come to you.

Q: That's right.

Q: Tufiño: Only good things can happen. So it's a challenge.

Q: That's right.

Tufiño: You got to challenge yourself to accept yourself and to love yourself, and to love other people around you, you know what I'm saying? And that [*unclear*], like Deana, she came out and she said, "What? Come here. Come to Guatemala. I'll have a place for you, I'll set it up for you," blah blah, this and the other, that. And all I did was paint and do my thing, and I was so happy. You know what I'm saying?

Q: Do you feel like you found community?

Tufiño: And this is Ronny. Ronny, this is Ronny, "Come and bring me these items." She comes and she brings it, you know what I mean? I mean, she's fantastic, you know, she's always very supportive, very whatever. So yes, be gay and be happy. Be happy all the time. The word says it, G-A-Y, gay. You know what I'm saying? So, you know—

Q: Do you feel like you found—I don't know, do you feel like you needed or found community as a Puerto Rican, Mexican, Gay, bisexual person?

Tufiño: Well, you know what, most of the people I had—you know, I'm telling you, my friends, like Margarita—

Q: You already had them.

Tufiño: I had them. [*Unclear*], Jesus, it was doing theater and all crazy things for many—and here I am, you know, having children, and whatever. But, you know, life happens when it happens.

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: And when it happens, you have to accept it.

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: You can't have those society stuff that, oh, that's wrong, or religious stuff, you know, going through your head, or not being accepted, or—I mean, like, listen, when I was a kid, I remember in my town in San Juan, I saw gay men, how they used to beat them up in the street. Remember? I don't know if you ever saw, just before they were a gay man? You know what I'm saying? Or because they have mannerism, whatever, and they used to beat the crap out of them, two, three, four guys used to go. I saw that when I was a kid, you know what I mean? You know, that pisses me off. You have to accept people for who they are, and whatever they are, man, I don't care. Color, idea, whatever. You have no right. No right. You have to be more humanistic, you know what I mean? More understanding. You don't understand? You want to be accepted? You have to accept others. You know, what is this judgment, this judgment in the head? This is a

condition that we have been brought up in society with. We've got to take it as sure of ourselves, you know what I mean?

Q: But you've been breaking boxes and boundaries for a long time, you know? When we started talking in this interview, you were talking about how you felt because you were a girl, that you were expected to do certain things, or to wear dresses. And you loved wearing pants. Or when you were coming up and being an artist, you were one maybe of a few painters that were doing this consistently, a muralist that were doing this consistently. And it was a Boys Club, it sounded, from the way you described it.

Tufiño: Yes, because you—listen, you worked with a bunch of men until late at night, and then you will go home. Then when you have children, you know, many, many times, like Jorge especially, he passed away, he was part of El Taller. Sometimes he didn't have a place where to stay. He would knock on my door and he knew that he could stay with me. You understand what I'm saying? I would always give him the couch, you understand? I'm a woman alone. So you're going to start thinking about gossiping on people, saying, you know, "Oh, *mira* [look], she has somebody at her house. *Mira*, she's with a bunch of men," blah blah this. You don't know what's happening, blah blah this—no! You understand? This type of shit during that time that the woman have to put up with.

Q: Wow.

Tufiño: If they have wine and they have this, it doesn't mean that I was also drinking during this time. [*Laughs*] I let them do whatever they want. I was doing my own things, you know what I mean? And they always respected me, you know, that's the whole thing. Respect.

Q: When we started—not when we started the interview, but early on, you were talking about how you're thinking about your legacy. We're in your studio—I mean, there's hundreds, hundreds of art works in this space, and this is not even the only space that you work out of.

Tufiño: No, I have another one in Jersey. My house in Jersey has a big—two studio, the—

Q: Oh, I believe you.

Tufiño: —the other, kind of this, and then over here, too, yeah.

Q: That's incredible. When you think about becoming an ancestor one day down the line, how do you want to be remembered? What do you want your legacy to be?

Tufiño: I want whatever my work, that if people look at it, can bring something to them, you know what I'm saying? And if they hear this oral history, that by listening to what I'm talking about, it will trigger then, you know, what is it to be gay and accepting yourself as being gay, and if your family doesn't accept it, don't give a damn. Continue doing what you're doing, that's their problem. You know what I'm saying? Love is love, and you can love a man and I can love a woman. You can love whoever you want, you know what I mean? And you should accept

yourself, and don't care—yes, sure, it feels hurt, because you love your family and you grew up with them, and you wish that it could be the same. Listen, things—be ready for change. In Buddhism, we are about change. Things can change in a snap.

Q: That's true.

Tufiño: So snap your finger—that's when change comes. But be ready for it. And remember, in the beginning, it's tough emotionally, whatever. But you will succeed because the most important thing is for you to accept yourself for who you are, and look at yourself in the mirror.

Q: I have one more question, and then I'm happy to open up the floor. What are the questions that you wish people would ask you? Is there something that we haven't talked about that you said, you know, I really want to speak about that, or I really want to mention that? It could be part of your personal life, it could be part of your art work.

Tufiño: I wish, I mean, it's more of a wish than anything else, that people would think or will be more humanistic with themselves, you know what I mean? That when you tackle things, or you look at other people, you could think of their humanity. Look at their humanity, don't look at their color, don't look at their idealism, or whatever. Be compassionate. Be compassionate and be humanistic, you know what I mean? Bring that human touch, you know what I mean? Why? Because we're not perfect. If we don't make mistakes, if we don't make mistakes, we don't grow. And if we don't grow, you get stagnated. And you've got to think about all of those things, you know what I'm saying?

Q: Is that humani—just to follow up on what you're saying, is that personal, intimate, humanistic approach, is that something you're thinking about—I mean, I've seen some of your work and your father's work, though it's different, they're in conversation with each other. And you both paint with such pride, pride for Puerto Rican people. And I see it in the prints and the drawings of the *Jíbaro* and *The Coffee Farmer*—I mean, I'm looking at even just now, a multi—a mixed media piece featuring a very, very—I don't know what year that photo is, but it's a vintage—

Tufiño: It's a vintage photo from the '50s, and that's in Adjuntas.

Q: Really?

Tufiño: And these are very old, old photos my father had that he gave to me. I inherited that, because he gave them to me especially. So I decided, how am I going to use this? Because every time I try to make something or do something, I'm always thinking, what value am I bringing into this? What value? I mean, what is it—not monetary value, humanistic value. What is this going to tell someone? How is this going to make a person think, you know, by looking at that? It's not only the photograph, it's a black and white photograph, but this is a story of a man that gets up in the morning, at 3:00 in the morning and goes to the mountain to pick up seeds for coffee. And they do this every day, and they take care of the trees, and all of that. And maybe he's dead already, and this is the only thing that exists that tells the story, you know what I mean? So there's a combination of that. That's the story that's in the picture, and then whatever is outside is the story that I'm telling, because I feel like I'm in an island, this is in the

mountains, you know what I mean? It's cold up there in the mountains, and things like that. So when you look at stuff like that and you see also the clothes, the canvas and all of that, because that's the coffee's put into the canvas and all of that, you go, well, if I make this and I make this and I'm enjoying making this, when somebody who looks at it who doesn't know me, or whatever, what value is it bringing to that person?

Q: I see a lot of dignity in that photo. I see in your art work that, what is the value of work and workers? When we think—I see a lot of respect and love and dignity that you paint, and that you put into these pieces of Puerto Ricans throughout time who worked very, very hard, and was underpaid, and who did valuable work, who did important things. I don't know, there's something so special, yes, maybe it's because my mother grew up in Adjuntas and was born on a hacienda, and her parents, my *abuelos* [grandparents] were coffee farmers, that is very sentimental for me. But there's a—sometimes I feel like there's a shame around that, or that's not important, or there's just bad memories. But these are people who knew the land very well, and they loved the land, and they respected the land, and they harvested and cultivated. And they were incredibly smart. I think there's something—

Tufiño: And they wanted to stay there.

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: They would have continued staying there, but the economic situation did not let them.

Q: That's right.

Tufiño: You know what I mean? So, *fijate* [look], you're saying also that this is something you don't talk about, something that, whatever—but then you got to—you look at it, and now you see it, you're going to see it in a different perspective.

Q: That's right.

Tufiño: It's a different perspective because—

Q: That's what I love about your work, yes.

Tufiño: —it's a different perspective because now you say, you know, gee, this doesn't exist anymore. And this is something that is dying on the island. There's not going to be the—most of the coffee picking is done in Guatemala, Colombia, and all of that. The island of Puerto Rico had—

Q: It can grow food year-round.

Tufiño: Exactly. Exactly. They could—there's a lot of things, a lot of young people now in Puerto Rico are trying to bring back agriculture.

Q: Yes. Yes.

Tufiño: There's a lot of them that are trying. But what I'm saying is that, when you look at that and you see, like, oh yes, they did it. Why can't we do it? Why can't we live off it? You know? It's all the politics and money.

Q: And Colonialism.

Tufiño: You know, the same thing with sugar, you know what I'm saying, the sugar cane is dead, you know what I'm saying?

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: Coffee, tobacco, you know what I mean? My grandmother was *tabaquera* [a tobacco farm worker] in Brooklyn. They used to bring the thing, and they used to grow the tobacco there. So what I'm saying is, like, these things, I'm so attached to it that I don't have a choice, than to do something with it. You know what I mean? I cannot say no, I am not going to do something about it, or, I'm going to do something else. I don't know, no. because there's so much inside here that I've got to bring it out.

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: Because everything is inside you and outside of you. You look at it, it goes back and forth, back and forth, you know what I'm saying? So everything. And then when you sit down

and you start working on a project, you go, what value can I bring by doing this that can do something for people when they look at it? You don't want to make something for the sake, or whatever. Well, I remember when it used to be art for our sake, you know what I mean? You throw something, and it's art. Well, anything. I could walk down the stairs and I see, oh, you know, that looks like art. Yes, it makes sense. But how do you bring value into it?

Q: Yes.

Tufiño: How do you bring all those special things that needs to happen, you know what I'm saying?

Q: Well, when I see your work, I see your great, great, great grandmother, Juanita. I see her family and your mother's family, and your father. I see all of these influences, and really a deep pride. Deep pride—

Tufiño: Thank you. Thank you.

Q: —for our people. And I just want to say thank you—

Tufiño: Thank you.

Q: —for everything that you have done for—just all that you've survived and been through to be an artist, to make an impact, and to create spaces for other Latina artists, women artists, gay artists to be themselves, and from El Museo del Barrio to El Taller, you're a pioneer.

Tufiño: Thank you.

Q: You're a pioneer.

Tufiño: Thank you for saying. *Y la lucha continúa* [And the fight continues].

Q: *Sigue* [It goes on].

Tufiño: We keep on doing, and we've got to—

Q: *Juntos* [Together].

Tufiño: Juntos. *Ahora, estamos juntos* [Now, we are together].

Q: *Sí, estamos* [Yes we are]. *Ahora* [Now].

Tufiño: Ahora, estamos juntos. *Para delante* [To move forward], and we've got to make it better.

Q: *Siempre* [Always]. Thank you so much.

Tufiño: Gracias. Thanks to you.

END OF INTERVIEW