

I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Vivian M. Varela

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Interviewee Vivian Varela conducted by Caro De Robertis on October 11, 2022. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: An Oral History of Our Elders Oral History Project.

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

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Narrator: Vivian Varela

Location: Garden Grove, CA

Interviewer: Caro De Robertis

Date: October 11, 2022

Q: Okay. Vivian, thank you so much for this honor of this conversation and time together with an oral history and thank you for welcoming me into your home here in Garden Grove, California.

Vivian: Well, of course. It's an honor for me to have been asked and invited and to have you here is just fantastic. I'm so nervous. I've been looking forward to this and yet at the same time I'm nervous. So, it's a good thing. It's a good thing.

Q: That's beautiful. We'll breathe and we'll just take the journey together.

Vivian: Yes.

Q: Could you please tell me your name and who you are?

Vivian: Very good question. My name is Vivian Marie Varela. The last name of my mother—in other words, her maiden name—is Lugo. So, if I were living in Latin America, my name would be Vivian Marie Varela Lugo. Here in the states, we don't use that, but I think it's important to make mention of it because I wondered about that in Chile, when I lived in Chile—we'll go into that. But I asked why they do that—I don't remember who I asked, but someone said, “Well,

pretty much it's because there's only going to be one Vivian Marie Varela Lugo." Very rarely are you going to find two, so they know who your parents are. So, that's kind of like why I like identifying with both.

But another reason why that is a very good question that I want to answer a little bit more is that some people have asked me where I got my name, who named me. They used to say, "I really like that name, Vivian. Who named you?" And over the years I have been asked that question. And I always say, "I like my name, too." And so, the answer that I have been giving over the years is that my father named me and then one woman got very specific and said, "I wonder why he named you Vivian." And I said, "I don't know, maybe during when I was born maybe there was an actress, I don't know, Vivian Vance or whoever." Oh, that's the creek of the rocking chair that I'm sitting in. Sorry about that.

So, finally, because that woman was so insistent, she said, "You know, is your dad still alive?" And I said, "Yes, he is." And she said, "Why don't you ask him?" So, I said, "Yes, I will." But for me it was like ask him again, because over the years I have asked him, and he gives the same answer: "I named you." I say, "Dad, who named me?" "I named you." Always the same answer. But I have never been satisfied with that. And I am going to end up putting this story on my podcast, but I think it's important here because I did call him not too long ago and he answered, and he said, "What's up?" which I hate that expression. "Nothing, Dad, I just wanted to ask you a question. Who named me?" Again, the flip answer, "I did." He said, "Wait a minute, no. To give you the right answer, I think I'm going to have to get a beer and sit down and tell you." I

said, “Okay.” He said, “No, really. Both your mother and I named you and each one of the children.” Because I love the names of my siblings. Every one of us has a middle name.

Q: How many siblings do you have?

Vivian: I have five. One is deceased already. So, between us, six were born and now five are still living.

Q: And may I ask when—?

Vivian: Do I include myself as five? Four.

Q: Five kids.

Vivian: Six all together, yes. Six kids.

Q: Six kids, five siblings.

Vivian: Five siblings.

Q: And when and where were you born?

Vivian: I was born in Fayetteville, North Carolina. The only one born out of California because my dad was in the military at the time, in the Army. He was a paratrooper. And apparently my mother said to us that she was afraid of flying, but she didn't want to be in Corona without my dad. So, she flew to North Carolina and that's where I was born.

Q: Corona, California is where your family was before that?

Vivian: Yes, that's where we were raised. We were raised in Corona. Spent most of our childhood years there, yes.

Q: And what year were you born?

Vivian: I was born in 1956.

Q: And how old were you when your family returned to Corona, California?

Vivian: Well, when you say family, it would've been—well, we were there. I mean, that's where my mother went to school in Corona, my father, I think he did go to some schooling in Corona. But as far as I know, he only went to like eighth grade or so; he didn't graduate from high school, but my mother did. So, they're from there, yes. But the North Carolina trip for me, being born in North Carolina, was just because my dad was in the military, came back to Corona after military service. And that's just where life was, in Corona.

Q: Life was in Corona.

Vivian: In Corona, yes. The other siblings were born—Corona was serviced by Riverside County because Corona's just a little town. It was at the time. If you go there now, now they have hospitals and stuff, whatever, everything. It's expanded to a ridiculous degree. But Riverside was our go-to place for hospital or sandwiches or whatever. *[Laughs]*

Q: And what was it like in Corona culturally, let's say, in the time that you were growing up?

Vivian: At the time that I was growing up, wow. I remember—yes, thank you for that question now. That takes me back. During elementary school, we walked to school, Lincoln Elementary in Corona. I remember summertimes were very, very hot. Then, downtown, there was a really cool place called Bell Book and Candle *[phonetic]*. They sold comic books, other kind of gifty type of things. It was also a pharmacy. And then it had a little lunch—like, a little counter where you could sit down and get some soup. I would go there whenever I had money, and I would go to Bell Book and Candle and sit at the counter and ask for a bowl of Campbell's mushroom soup. That was my favorite. And so then I would buy a comic book like Richie Rich and Gloria, or also I used to buy Hit Parader *[phonetic]* magazines, because I loved music.

And that's what I remember early life in Corona, walking to school. That was mostly it. Just having freedom. We had freedom. Well, my parents didn't really watch over us too much. Maybe in the beginning years, yes, they did. My grandmother on my mother's side went to the Mexican Baptist Church. So, she would encourage my mom and my dad, I know for sure one

year, to be a part of the Christmas play. So, that was a cool thing, and that's my childhood. Those are happy memories when my dad would play Santa Claus and read the names off the gifts and pass them around. He was a very jovial person, and he has a charismatic personality. So, everyone loved being around—they called him Bob. His name is Robert. So, those are a few things that I remember about my childhood in Corona.

Q: And what are some of the seeds in your childhood of the person that you are today when you look back?

Vivian: I think somehow my tenacity. I was very curious always about things. I didn't have much control as a child, but I guess the seeds of a worldly life that I didn't really want to follow. I was curious about many things, but in my childhood—because I was only about ten when my parents divorced, so after that my mother introduced other people who were drug addicts or *[laughs]* families where they would go to parties and take my mother with them. But then my mother would leave us with babysitters.

Q: And what was that like for you to experience that shift in your family life?

Vivian: Yes, that was very difficult, difficult for me to navigate, because I'm the oldest of six. And so, I always felt that I had a responsibility toward my siblings. And I had to make sure that there was food in the house. My grandmother, who was still alive, lived just down the block. And so I would rely on them a lot, my grandparents. But like I said, different life scenarios and people and situations would come and go in our lives, and I was curious about it, but I never

really wanted to follow those paths. I always felt that if we're talking about seeds, there was something inside of me that wanted to follow my own path. There was something about—I don't know what or how, but I was looking to, as a child even, to maintain my own integrity. I don't know how else to explain it.

Maybe I had mentioned before off-mic, but I'm a little bit of a control freak. Like, let me make sure, maybe I should control this. No, I've had to learn how to let go of control. But maybe as a child because things were so out of control, I felt the need to be in control. So, I think that's what I mean by the seeds of tenacity, being curious, not going with the flow. If something didn't seem right, I wouldn't do it. Or if I was curious about something, I wanted to try what is this little white pill that gives you a lot of energy, let me try it, and I did. Or this little red pill, let me try it, and I did. What is it like to talk on the phone with this boy or go to this party or have a party. Those kinds of things, but still, I think the seeds—the word is tenacity. I don't know why that word comes to me.

Q: Are there any particular stories that rise to mind that you might want to share of this period of your life where things were more out of control in your household after the divorce and stories of how perhaps you carried or looked out for, took care of your siblings, or had to show that tenacity?

Vivian: The very difficult thing is—a couple of stories. One is there were points where we did not have anything to eat in the house. And I really did not like zucchini, but my grandfather had a garden in the back, and he would teach me—or anyone who was interested, but I know he

taught me—how to water the rows of veggies or chilis or watermelon, whatever he was growing. And since there was nothing to eat, I went out there and I found some zucchini and somehow, I got twenty-five cents' worth of cheese and for us, put that together, even if it doesn't have onion, and it's called *calabacitas*. So, I made some *calabacitas* and I was like, oh, I love this because *me alimentó*. It fed me and us, whoever we were in the house.

There was one painful situation where my dad was doing some upholstery work in my grandfather's garage and we didn't have any milk and I said, "Dad, I need like fifty cents for milk." I said, "But you don't have to give me the exact amount." He knew it cost fifty cents. And so, he gave me a quarter. I expected that he would give me more than fifty cents. And that was very disappointing to realize that he would do something like that. That anyone would do something—I had the courage and the—I guess I thought that I was being diplomatic knowing that we needed more than milk, but to be given twenty-five cents instead of fifty, that was painful. And so that's another painful situation.

There's one more I want to mention because it will demonstrate the out-of-control at some point situations. Well, of course my siblings got tired of listening to me saying, "Stop fighting!" [Laughs] But when my little brother went into rehab, I guess it was somewhere around 1999 or so, I went to family week and I listened to stories. And one of the stories that he shared that I did not know, he said that he would hide under the bed. I think someone had taken—you know, they used to spray paint, a can of paint, into a bag and then they would sniff the paint out of the bag [makes sound] like that and that would cause a high. And so my little brother said—and he was probably only five years old maybe—he saw them do it, so he did it himself under the bed. Got a

baggie somehow and was sniffing that paint and that's where his addictions started, under the bed. That was very painful to hear because it was a situation that I did not know anything about, and I truly had no control over. And so I lamented that greatly.

So, those are just a few examples of what it was like to be raised after my parents divorced in an alcoholic home. That's the harsh, cruel, raw reality. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, she would scare the living daylights out of me because she would say, "You'd better go to bed or you'd better do your studies or you'd better do this, you'd better do that because Jesus is coming." [Laughs] So, that was her threat. There was no other—we never got spanked or she didn't yell at us. It would be maybe in a stern voice, "Jesus is coming." And that was her way of getting us to I guess have the fear of God. And so that might be a seed of where I did learn what it was like to have the fear of God. [Laughs]

Q: And what was it like for you? How did you experience it in your body, if you recall, when she would say do this or this because Jesus is coming?

Vivian: Yes. I took it seriously. I just remember I thought, I'd better behave. I'd better get this together. So, I felt a responsibility. And probably because I was the oldest, but I did feel a responsibility. So, yes, that's how I felt. I was being watched also. And I think negative connotations of God started there. And I've since then worked through that, but yes, God is calculating and checking how I'm doing and what I'm doing and always aware that I was being watched. I'm not sure, maybe judged also. So, that's kind of how I felt about that.

Q: Yes. Thank you so much. And I want to ask you more about your grandmother's religion and how you experienced it and how you became more involved over time. But first, I'm wondering if you could tell us about how you experienced your gender as a young person, whether as a child or as a teenager. Does anything rise to mind?

Vivian: When I was growing up, I did feel that I was kind of tomboy-ish because I really did not like to wear dresses and I liked to run around in the yard and play in the water and do things like that. I wasn't much for dolls. I don't think I even—I don't recall having a doll. Oh, I had a dancing doll, which was my favorite. I do talk about that in one of my podcasts. I loved that doll because I would dance with her. Because you connect her to your feet and then with music, you just hold the doll and dance. That was my favorite doll. So, gender, there you go, I am pretty sure I was the boy.

Q: In the dance?

Vivian: In the dance, yes, yes. I am pretty sure, yes. Because the doll had long hair. I had long hair too, but I did identify with male—*[phone rings]* I thought I put this on silence, I think I'm just going to turn it off because I don't want to—oops, I just took a picture of the time. *[Laughs]* So, I loved that dancing doll. And like I said, I identified as the boy. And I think yes, I'm recalling watching the Beatles on television, and I would identify for some reason with Ringo because he played the drums, he was in the background. And I don't know what that's about, but I felt male, I identified—

I did have a boyfriend in, I guess, junior high or whatever. And when I was a kid at church, I followed around and tried to chase down the preacher's son, he was very cute. [*Laughs*] And he always was like clean-cut dressed. I always loved that. Maybe I wanted to be that. So, yes, as a child I think there was one boy who used to work downtown and sometimes he would—James is his name—he would pass by Corona. He was very, very cute, handsome, handsome guy, boy. And I remember one time I saw him coming down the street and I was outside but without a top and I started feeling a little bit embarrassed.

So, I hid my breasts and that was my thing where I took notice of myself that I was shy, that I didn't feel comfortable with bodily exposure or anything like that. I think for me, that was that, but I never could articulate it. I really couldn't. One of the things that one of my siblings told me that kind of hurt me to a certain degree, but I couldn't stop, she said, "You always pay more attention to your friends than you do to us, your family." And my thing was that I guess I felt an affection toward friends who were girls. I never, ever made a move toward them because I was too shy. But I did feel attracted to my girlfriends.

Q: As a teenager?

Vivian: Yes, as a teenager.

Q: Do you remember consciously understanding your attraction to them as a romantic or sexual attraction?

Vivian: No, no.

Q: Or how did you make sense of those attractions or feelings in your mind at the time?

Vivian: I really didn't, I couldn't. It was all so deep inside of me. I think I felt—I have been thinking about this in preparation—I felt shame, I think. Because remember the control thing. I had no control over my feelings for girls, but I did not want to act on them. I didn't, I didn't. It didn't cross my mind to act. I would just hang out and I always wanted to be with my friends.

But if I think of my childhood friends, there's one girl for sure that I was stuck on, and that was from kindergarten. I will say her name because I feel no shame about it. I loved her. Her name is Olivia—as far as I know, she's still alive. I loved her. A few things about her that I loved. We would read together, those little card things and then you answer, and we would kind of compete. And she had long hair, she was beautiful, intelligent. And so, we would talk and laugh. She was from one side of town, the wealthier side of town, and I was from the poor side of town. Later in fifth grade, my fifth-grade teacher burnt that connection. We were in line and my fifth-grade teacher said, "Vivian—" because I would follow Olivia—we're going through elementary school, all the way up to [*phonetic*] fifth grade—

Q: And fifth grade is later, so when you already felt that deep love for her, you were younger than fifth grade? How old?

Vivian: Yes, I was in kindergarten, for sure. Yes, kinder. Yes, for sure I know that's where I loved her, yes. But I don't recall holding hands or anything like that; it was just fun and knowing that she was my friend. I don't even remember if we sat together. I don't have those memories of sitting together. I have memories of being in kinder not having a nickel to buy milk and the other kids did. I have that memory that doesn't go away. But I guess we all had towels and so when it was naptime, we all had to take a nap. But I'm thinking first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, I mean, she was around. And we would probably play together on the playground, but I don't remember being so deeply attached.

I didn't notice until this teacher in fifth grade said, "Vivian, why do you always have to hang onto Olivia's apron strings?" That cut everything. From there on out, I kind of separated myself from her. And I think she separated herself from me. And that was very painful, very painful. And I've always disliked that teacher for that reason because I learned later that I think that teacher was in a female relationship with another teacher during that time. My cousin told me about that. I was like, "Oh, my God. Hypocrite," and doing damage to me. That did damage to me, it did. It hurt. And so, that shame, I never allowed myself to really pursue a relationship with a girl. I didn't allow myself to. I don't recall thinking, I am not allowing myself. I guess I just was too afraid to even think of it. Maybe it was a God thing, or I don't know, but I didn't want to think of it. I just thought, this is my friend. I want to—after I got a car, let's go for a ride in the car. And I was content to drive all around with my friend in the car and that's all.

Q: That's all. Do you have any memories of your parents or other family members responding to your maleness or your masculinity the way that they perceived it?

Vivian: Yes, especially my mother. She would—I don't know if the word is tease, but comment, "Why can't you walk like Aurelia? Do you see how Aurelia walks?" And I was like, "Yes, but that's not me. I walk the way I walk." So, from a very young age, my mother wanted me to be more feminine. I know that because there is a picture of me—it might be lost, it might be gone now—but there is a picture of me in a frilly, girly, lacy outfit that my mother put me in with white gloves that had lace around the wrists. So, there is a picture of me, but that probably was the last time she could get me to wear something like that. *[Laughs]* So, yes, my mother always wanted me—and then, even as an adult, my mom would try—she would say, "Look at this dress." And I would feel like I wanted to throw up. And I tried. I tried; I did wear dresses. I tried. *[Laughs]* It didn't work, but I tried it. I will wear a dress if there is a character in a play or some kind of comedy situation that you want me to do; I will do it. I'll dress to the nines.

Q: As comedy, as performance.

Vivian: Comedy, as performance. But no, please, no. Please, no.

Q: But in those times as a young adult when you did try to wear a dress, not for performance but to sort of pass as a more feminine person or when you did try to wear a dress, what was it like for you? What did you experience in your body when you would do that?

Vivian: It was unpleasant, uncomfortable. I didn't like it. I didn't like it. Yes, that was when I was younger. Pretty much since I didn't have much adult supervision, even though I knew what

my mother's preferences were, she was not around very much to dictate and to enforce. So, I pretty much wore what I wanted to wear. And my brothers would always be impressed by what I would wear. Because since I'm the oldest, when Levi cords came out—and I was working because even at twelve years old, I started working cleaning someone's house. So, I had money to buy cords. So, I had like different colors of Levi chords and my brothers, they wanted to have that too. So, I kind of was more on the male, kind of neutral dressed, even though I didn't realize what I was doing. But that's what I was doing. So, I guess the word was tomboy. So, if there were any character with any inkling of tomboy-ishness on TV, then that's the one I would follow or feel an affinity to. Yes, for sure.

So, there was a little bit of struggle on that with my mother, but other than that, I don't recall being overly pressured by anyone to wear dresses. The only other time was when I lived in Chile, but this is later in my adult life. And I got a job at an international school as a teacher. Did I start out as a teacher? I might've started out as a teacher, teacher's aide, but getting a job there meant I kind of had to dress up for it. At least that's how it was when I first started. So, when my partner at the time put makeup on me, I cried because I was wearing an actual skirt, blouse kind of thing, and then makeup. And then, no, I cried because I just couldn't stand it. But then I learned how to put makeup on. [*Laughs*] I learned how to do it myself, so I was okay with it, I did it.

Q: Could we talk about your relationship to your grandmother's religion? What it was, what it was like and how you became involved, how that affected you.

Vivian: It very much affected me. My grandmother, Amelia Limón, I think her maiden name was Cenicerós [*phonetic*] or something like that. She was raised Mexican Baptist if I recall correctly. I think her mother might've been Methodist. Maybe before that they were Catholic. And if you look at the history of religion, then we have to look at also the separation of California and Mexico because we were here and then they just put borders and now it's New Mexico. Oh, okay. So, you have to take that into account. But my grandmother—well, when I had consciousness of who she was, and anything related to church was Mexican Baptist.

And Mexican Baptist is quite rare for Mexican people in general because it's a Protestant religion, but the Mexican Baptists had their own convention, it was an offshoot of the American Baptist Convention. There is a Southern Baptist, which is way more conservative, but American Baptist was considered a teeny bit less conservative. So, then they had the Mexican people who were part of this then organize themselves and became Mexican Baptists with their own convention and everything.

And that was a big thing, like I said, for my grandmother. She would take us to church. I really enjoyed helping her fill the little communion glass cups. They're like little glass cups with Welch's grape juice. And then we had to get like white bread, you know like Wonder Bread or something, cut off the edges and put those to the side and then cut the bread into little squares. So the communion was Wonder Bread, little square, and then a little cup with Welch's grape juice and that was done once a month. And I enjoyed helping my grandmother with that, with churchy kind of things. Whenever they had hamburger night, oh, delicious. The homemade hamburgers. Oh, my God, they were so good, juicy and plump with fresh lettuce, tomato. At that

time, I could eat onion, with a nice little bun. I mean, just perfect tasty, best hamburger you could ever taste.

And I don't recall going to church—you know, because church is also community, but I was trying to think of whether or not there were days where women would get together and make *tamales*. No, pretty much everyone made their own *tamales*, so I couldn't recall that. But something like the hamburger night, everybody was pitching in. So my grandmother was the treasurer; her and Grandpa would bring home the money. And then they would have to spread the coins on the table, and I would always ask if I could help count it. So, you would have to stack the pennies into stacks of ten and then they would put them in those little paper rolls. So, they were active in the church. And at the time, when I was a child, my grandmother's mother, so my great grandmother, lived with them. Her name was Adelaida, AdelaidaGonzalez [phonetic]. And she had a long, gray braid. She had a gigantic bible that she would read, and she would [makes sound] open that bible. It's like the big one, the big display bible. And then she would read, follow along with her finger and read *en español*. In my family, *no aprendimos a hablar español; solamente cuando los adultos querían que no entiéramos, hablaban español. Si no, todo en inglés.*

Q: *¿Tus padres también hablaban español entre sí para que no entendieran los niños?*

Vivian: *Muy poco, ellos. Muy poco escuché que hablaban entre ellos.*

Q: *Ah, claro.*

Vivian: *Como quizás los primeros diez años y yo era niña todavía.*

Q: *Sí, claro.*

Vivian: *Entonces, no tengo memoria de ellos hablando entre sí en español, no, no. Solamente mis abuelos y mi bisabuela. The creek of the chair [laughter] has to get in there.*

Q: *Pero entonces, ¿tus abuelos y tu bisabuela hablaban entre sí en español?*

Vivian: *Sí.*

Q: *Ahí oyes el español.*

Vivian: *Exacto.*

Q: *¿Y en la iglesia oyes el español?*

Vivian: *También. Era puro español. A menos que las clases de niños y todo en inglés, en inglés. Pero sermón, conversación, la gente entre sí hablando español.*

Q: *¿Y entendías todo?*

Vivian: *No, no todo, no. Pero la mayoría. Y me hablaban en español, pero yo contestaba en inglés. Entonces, ya. Pero yo no quería aprender español para nada, no. No, un señor de la iglesia como que—en Chile, se dice la palabra me retó. Como que scold. Decía, “Tú debes aprender español.” Y le contesté, “Why? I don’t need it. I don’t need it.” That’s what I said. And he didn’t bother me really much after that, but those words have always slapped me in the face.*

Q: “I don’t need it”?

Vivian: I don’t need it. Because I have truly needed Spanish in my life. And I love it. I love the language and I’ve learned so much.

Q: What does it mean to you to have Spanish in your life and in your mind now?

Vivian: Yes, it means so much. I really wanted to become bilingual, fully bilingual because by the influence of my grandmother and I know my mother’s sister, who also went to church—see, the reason I even was so influenced by church was because as a teen, things were just out of control. Completely out of control. At sixteen, I realized we are not in a good place. I really feared for the life, my own, and my mother and my siblings because my mother was going out and we were left alone, and I couldn’t see a future in Corona. So, I asked a friend to help me—this was after my grandmother died. She died an early death. She was only sixty-seven. Oh, no, sixty-five. She was only sixty-five. And after my grandmother died, my mother went into a depression and really just started doing her own thing.

And so, like I said, we were not in a good place. I asked a friend to help me, and I moved my family—believe me, I don't know how I did this. Because I could not have been—let me see, how old? Maybe sixteen. I found a place in La Sierra, a house to rent which was bigger than where we lived in a one-bedroom in Corona. And it was like a three-bedroom in La Sierra. We were on welfare, so how they allowed me to make that switch, I don't know. I don't know if I had to get my mom to sign something. And so, I moved them over there and the house was bigger, but we didn't have any furniture to fill it. So, the house was empty basically. Well, maybe each one had a bed in the room, maybe a couch in the living room and a table. Sparse, sparsely furnished.

But soon after, my mom's friends would just drive ten, fifteen, twenty minutes to La Sierra, pick up my mother and there we were by ourselves again. But at least I felt I was out of Corona; I didn't quite make it in high school. So, I flunked tenth grade. I went to continuation and then so when I moved to La Sierra, I went back to high school and almost finished and ended up not being able to graduate there either. But at the time, about sixteen or seventeen or so, I would on the weekends take the bus from La Sierra to Anaheim to go to church with my aunt. And so, my aunt, my mom's sister—my mom had three siblings, two boys and the two girls. And so, she had her sister who was an avid, to the point of obsessive, churchgoer. And in retrospect, I can truly say that, and Aunt Elma, you know, my ancestors, you can hear me, you know I'm telling the truth. *[Laughs]* I'm telling the truth.

Q: And so then you became more involved with the church.

Vivian: I did, yes, with the Mexican Baptist Church. So, on weekends she would pick me up at the bus station and then we would go to church and that was a cool thing. And then I joined youth group and choir and I wanted to be a youth leader, which I was. And then I have—I'll show you—I have a magazine article called *He Made Just One Like You*. And I actually have it that I can show you, saying that God—there's only one Vivian. There's only one of you, [Caro], and of every person. And so, the way that it was written, it really impressed me that yes, there's only one me, okay. And so, I thought, I want to give myself to the service of God and maybe God will help my family because I felt that it required supernatural help.

Because the way things were going, it was not good. My sister, who was born after me, was experimenting with drugs and got hooked and would come over and ask me for money and it was just so painful, so painful. Because I didn't want to be a part of that. I didn't want to go that way, the drugs. I didn't want to. So, yes, I experimented with pot, and I told you the little red pill, the little white pill. Someone said that they gave me this, it was like a chocolatey kind of thing, and they said it was mezcaline, but I really don't know. I tasted some, I don't even know if it did anything. But anyway, I'm just telling you that I'm not Miss Goody Two-Shoes.

*[Laughs]*

Q: The church gave you a different road—

Vivian: Yes.

Q: —a different possibility—

Vivian: Yes.

Q: —than the road of more intense drug use, like happened for your sister. Is that right?

Vivian: Yes, that's right, yes. So, I went that way, had a personal, spiritual experience and then decided this missionary school that my aunt—she was supporting a missionary family, that we knew among the Mexican Baptist circle. And so, they were at this missionary school and so I decided to sign up for it and at the same time, I also signed up to be a bilingual teacher's aide in Santa Ana, which is Orange County, where a lot of Latinos had settled, more so than Anaheim. And so, I said to myself, "Whoever answers first, that's where I'm going." It was after I turned eighteen. And the letter from the missionary school came first accepting me into missionary school. And then shortly after that as I was packing my things, I got the letter from the city of Santa Ana saying I had been accepted to be a bilingual teacher's aide.

And I always wonder how my life would've been different going the teacher's aide route. I always wonder about that. But I don't regret. I think going the missionary route did allow me to experience myself fully, whereas when I think about the demands of teachers and how sometimes you fall into a role. And maybe I did too as a missionary, but the life after training and things like that, it was life. It wasn't like you go to a school and then you teach and then you have a lot of paperwork to deal with and you're working on the weekends and then you go back to school. No, it wasn't like that. It was a different kind of lifestyle.

Q: And how did you make your way to coming out to yourself and others?

Vivian: Well, that's a pretty big jump.

Q: Is it? Is it a big jump?

Vivian: It is. It is because my work—I had to get some water—my work as a missionary, I think I was on the same kind of—I don't know what to call my own mindset. And I think part of me was really ruled by fear. There was something about me that was ruled by fear. Afraid of I don't know. I kind of want to say was I afraid of myself? I don't know. But I kind of felt like I was hiding something. So, that's why I say it was a big jump because we're talking about missionary school and going into missionary service, and during that time for some there was an expectation that—and some people did, they would find somebody that they wanted to date. And I know that there were a couple of guys that maybe like, oh, he's Mexican American and so is Vivian; maybe they'll get together. But no, the guys were my buddies, right? *[Laughs]*

So, and then girls, well, I had friends that I liked and that I found attractive, but there wasn't one in particular that I would gravitate towards, no. I mean, yes, we were friends, but it was like we were friends and that was it. And I don't know if I was—I know for sure I was—there's one thing about being in church, I was hiding my sexuality. I know that. Yes, for sure, I felt afraid of that.

Q: So, it sounds like you were aware of your sexuality even if in a sub-sub-subconscious way.

Vivian: Subconscious, vague level.

Q: And so you had a fear of it being revealed to people?

Vivian: Yes.

Q: Can you talk more about what it was like? What you knew and understood about yourself and what you were afraid of?

Vivian: Okay, the number one fear that I had was fear of getting pregnant. So, that's what would stop me from engaging in heterosexual relationships because I did not want to get pregnant. So, I knew that off the bat. But what happened while I was in missionary school, there were two women—beautiful women—both singers, talented. One was from Japan; one was of Mexican American descent. And they went out on a camping trip, and when they came back, they got in trouble. And I don't know what they did, but I know that their getting in trouble was announced to the rest of the people at missionary school here in Long Beach. And the way they put it was—I don't think I should say names in case—but D and R are not allowed to speak to each other. They cannot sit together, they cannot eat together, they are being disciplined.

And so that caused a great amount of curiosity inside of me. I was like, what did they do? Why? Why is this? And no one would talk to us about what this was about. And the only thing we knew is that R was going back to her country of origin and D was being disciplined so that she

couldn't even go on home visits or activities and things like that. So, I was like, wow, what happened? And that just stayed in my mind. It was uncomfortable when we saw they were both in the dining room; we were all in the dining room because we all had dinner together. And it was just strange, you know, one was over there, and one was over here and never the twain shall meet again. So, it was weird to experience that. And it was weird to experience that no one wanted to talk about it.

So, here I go plodding along and doing my missionary work and going traveling and visiting churches, getting support to go on the mission field. And so, I traveled by car with one couple who had been serving in France and a woman who had been serving in Guatemala and we took two cars and went from Long Beach, California to Guatemala City, Guatemala by car. This was in the '70s when it could be done. I had just turned twenty-one. And so, we went through Brownsville, Texas, through Mexico to Guatemala. That was an interesting adventure. The couple that I was traveling, the ones that were from France, later they said that that trip was done too fast. Because we were like practically non-stop traveling. And it took us about two weeks to get there. But they said it was too fast, that we should've taken more time to slowly move along, travel.

So anyway, the reason why I have to insert that in there is because after my—I don't know how much you want me to share with you about my being a missionary, but if I were to—and I show you here, I have a poster that I made where I show—see, here's Brownsville Texas, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Isla San Andres, Cartagena, Colombia, Bogota, Guayaquil, Ecuador,

Cuenca, Quito, Lima, Huancayo, Arequipa, Tacna, La Paz, Santa Cruz, Argentina, Mendoza, Buenos Aires. So, the various places.

Q: You went to all of these places as a missionary?

Vivian: Let me see. As a missionary, not La Paz, Santa Cruz, Argentina, Mendoza, no. That was another leg of life. So, all the way up to Tacna, which is the border with Chile. So, in Chile; I was in Chile for a couple of years. So, when I was in Chile, from Central America we had a conference and they sent us—cause I was supposed to serve in Bogota, Colombia, but they weren't allowing missionaries. They were kicking them out due to the government at the time. And so, two missionary families traveled and decided to settle in Chile, and this was after the dictatorship was already in place and they were accepting missionaries to be there, like Mormons and Hari Krishna, and these Christian missionaries and other—

The organization that I belonged to was called Christians in Action. So, it was an interdenominational organization. It wasn't like the Mexican Baptist, you know, more formal, more mainstream; this was just two men who wanted to do this missionary work. And they came up in military and so they ran their organization kind of like military style. So, anyway, while I was in Chile, after I had already traveled and had been really exhausted and I was tired, there was one winter where it was so cold and we didn't have—I guess one of the men, there were two families living there, forgot that we didn't have kerosine. So, we had to go through the night without heat.

And so, the missionary, the one who was more seasoned who really did not want to go to Chile, but they forced her to go to Chile—because they didn’t want to send me by myself as a new missionary—she said, “Vivian, you should come and sleep on my bed because it’s way too cold. And the two of us, the body warmth, at least we’ll make it through the night.” Because in Chile we’re talking about below zero; we’re not just talking sixty-five degrees, which is about all that I can handle, sixty-five. *[Laughs]* This is really cold. So, I remember feeling like yes, that makes sense in my head, but I felt butterflies in my tummy. Now, I know for sure that I was not attracted to her. Not attracted to her. But like I said, I had these butterflies in my tummy. Why? What is that about?

So, the thought of sharing a bed with someone—because we weren’t really friends. I mean, we were acquaintances, but like I said, she didn’t want to be there in Chile. So, we didn’t bond as friends. We did go spend some vacation days together, but it was just pleasant. I know that I wasn’t her friend, because I know she had friends in Guatemala, and I saw her interact with her friends. I wasn’t her friend. So, when she said that, I reluctantly went over to her bed, but I curled up with my back toward her on one side of the bed. And for sure, I did not sleep that night. But it was because I was just curled up and feeling so fucking cold. Oops. *[Laughs]* That f-word came out. It was really cold. And so, the next—I was still ill, I was weak, and I didn’t know why. And it turns out that I had amoebas, you know, after a lot of traveling and everything. I didn’t know what amoebas were, but it’s some kind of a little microbe gets into the intestines and they *chupan el alimento de la sangre o no sé donde. Los intestinos, me imagino.*

*Entonces*, there was a wonderful missionary family. They were serving with a group called Foursquare Missionaries. Well, I will say their names because they were angels: Grace and Wendel Phillips [*phonetic*]. I remember their names. And they had two boys—I don't remember their names. But Grace—I remember that name—because truly it was grace that was present, when I was feeling so sick, she had been going through a multivitamin therapy for I think she had bone cancer. And she was compassionate toward me because I really didn't know what was going on with my health, I was just fatigued. And so, she would bring over vitamins and make suggestions to me like that and she would visit me in my room upstairs.

And one day the director's wife came upstairs, and her name starts with an M, and she said, "Vivian, why are you so sick? Maybe it's a spiritual problem, not a physical problem." And so, when she said that, I really started feeling uncomfortable about myself. And I said, "The only thing I can think of is that I had butterflies in my stomach when I had to sleep in my missionary friend's bed that night when we didn't have heat." There was no conversation after that.

Apparently, it was misinterpreted that I had feelings for this woman, which I did not. No one ever asked me. It was interpreted that I—I was perceived to be gay. But no one told me that I was perceived to be gay. She said, "Okay, from now on, you cannot have your children's club, *Club de los Alegres*, no, that stops. You cannot interact with the youth group, and you cannot go on your visits." And I say, "Why? What did I do? What did I do?" Silence. Nothing, nothing. And we had—

Q: What was that like for you to be perceived as gay and to have these consequences or punishments for that perception at that time?

Vivian: Absolutely devastating. I'm sure I almost lost my mind because I was crying all the time. Crying, crying, crying. I took a belt and hit myself with it because I thought, something's wrong with me.

Q: And how did you make the journey from that state of absolute devastation to the time where you came out to yourself and others? How did you do it?

Vivian: Yes. By the help of Grace. [*Laughs*] I knew that I couldn't stay there anymore. And so, I told them I'm going to go for a bike ride, and I went about five long, long blocks to a family that I knew had a phone. And so, I called my aunt Elma, the one here in Anaheim, and I said, "I need to come home." And I didn't have money for the ticket. So, they made a dinner, gathered up the money, and bought me a ticket for me to come home. And that was in December of 1980. And so, by the help of Grace, and I don't know if Wendel was there, but I know Grace was there, she drove. She could drive herself. They had a van. She came to pick me up. And like I said, she would visit me when—she would just come. Even though they had prohibited visitors, she would say, "I came to see Vivian." And they would let her in, and she would just walk right upstairs, and she would visit with me. No judgment, nothing. Only love.

And so, I guess I told her that I was going back and that I was leaving. And she said, "I'll take you to the airport." Which she did; I got a direct flight from Santiago to LA December of '80. And then I just decided to live with my mom again and my sister was there. And my sister, Patricia, who is now deceased, is the one who helped me get through. I did go to in air quotes

“Christian counseling,” but I also just did some processing on my own. And so, with my sister, we decided—or I decided, and I don’t know if she was with me on this, but I said, okay, I’m—she wanted me to sue them because they had grossly mistreated me. I requested meetings because I had done nothing. I wanted them to question the neighbors, question the people I work, question everybody. What have I done wrong? What have I done wrong? And they wouldn’t.

So, they believed this woman, who also was not a witness—she was a witness to the fact that I said I had butterflies in my tummy. What does that mean? Did you ask the missionary if I had done anything to her? Where was the crime? There was none. There was none. But no one would follow through. They made an assumption, and they stayed with that. I guess what I have found and observed over time, people would rather say something negative about you and never check it out. They just would rather—I’m going to have to blow my nose, so I don’t know if you want to—

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center      Session Number: 2

Narrator: Vivian Varela

Location: Garden Grove, CA

Interviewer: Caro De Robertis

Date: October 11, 2022

Q: So, Vivian could you tell us about once you arrived back in California from your missionary work, how you made your way to the space where you were able to come out?

Vivian: Yes, thank you for that question. I really am grateful to my sister, Patricia, because she helped me. She helped me make the transition. I knew that my service as a missionary, I had done what I wanted to do and so I thought, what is the next thing that I could do that I've always wanted to do? So, I thought, I want to go back to school. So, I signed up for classes at Fullerton College, the least expensive. I wanted to go to a bible college, but it just wasn't working out. And so, I started there, and I took a class in assertiveness training and sociology—anything that was of interest to me that I thought I could follow or maybe this will be a career for me. Anything that I had any kind of curiosity about, and one of those classes was human sexuality.

And in that class, the teacher was just magnificent. She explained in a scientific way and educational way and intelligent way the function and I guess the description of what all human sexuality entails. And this is in the early '80s. This was when I think Masters and Johnson had just come out with their study that there was a continuum of human sexuality and orientation, and on one side there are individuals who are completely heterosexual; they've never even fantasized about anyone of the same sex. Completely, like maybe one percent. And then there

was the other end of the scale were there were individuals who had only had homosexual experiences and never even fantasized about anyone of the opposite sex. And then the explanation after the creaking of the rocking chair is that in the middle, you know, like, in-between those two extremes, everyone else was in the middle.

And when I saw that illustration, I thought, I am in the middle. That is one thing that I recall distinctly. Because I understood it with my head that I am in the middle. Because I have been attracted to men and I have never had a homosexual experience. And I was already twenty-six. So, the doorway, the pathway to discovering my own sexuality was through my brain. I had to understand it with my brain. And then, through the class in human sexuality, the teacher also explained to us—and I'm thinking of two main things besides the whole gamut of—the class was absolutely beautiful, fantastic. It was in the early '80s, like I said, because this was also a movement where women were educating themselves about women's bodies and women's sexuality and women's health. This is when the Women's Health Collective came out, *Our Bodies Ourselves*. And so, this whole movement was happening.

And so, when I was in class, she explained, in graphic detail, how one becomes pregnant and how one can prevent pregnancy if you are in a female body, right? And so, I learned, okay, that means that I can have sex and if I do these things, then there is a ninety-nine percent chance that I will not get pregnant. So, my curiosity and tenacity led me to finally, have the desire to say I would like to experience having sex. But my first go-to thought was with a man. So, the way I say it, with a man. [*Laughs*] That sounds funny to me.

So, my sister who, although younger, really was very much more, for various reasons, and I wish I could tell her story, there are some very tragic parts to her story, but she was not afraid and she was not of the idea—she was opposite me. She didn't worry about control or self-control. If she wanted to do something, she did it. And I hesitated on that, as I mentioned before. So, I told her that through class, I told her, "I think I am gay. I think I'm gay." And so, I said, "But I would like to know—" I don't know how I said this to her, but something about having sex with someone. So, we went out to this Mexican restaurant and there were some guys who asked us to dance and—crazy when you think about it today. I mean, I would never do this and never recommend this, but whoever was asking me to dance, and they were like getting all cozy and everything, this guy asked me to go with him to a hotel to have sex.

And I told my sister, and she said, "I don't know, we don't know him." I said, "It's okay, don't worry." And so, [*laughs*] she rightly worried. But it was okay. I mean, it ended up—I was safe, I was okay. But this guy, who's Mexican—funny—he—I say funny. Funny like not ha-ha. His goal was to impregnate women so that there would be more Mexicans. [*Laughs*] He actually said that to me. And another not funny ha-ha was that he had a big penis. And so, he was like really proud of that. I mean, he had to make sure that he showed me, you know, his penis. So, I mean, this transaction, this sexual transaction felt very much like a transaction. Like, it wasn't like oh, you know, we got so hot for each other at the dance, you know.

No, it was like, I want to have sex with you. Okay, let's go and get in the car with his friends. But you have to use a condom, that's one thing, you have to use—cause in my head I'm thinking, my teacher told me that you have to use a condom and then that anti—the contraceptive

foam and you're ninety-nine percent sure you're not going to get pregnant. So, I said that, I think I had my foamy part. [*Laughs*] So, we had to stop at a bar where he knew that there was a machine in there that sold condoms. So, went in there, got condoms, came back out, we went to this hotel room and then we just had sex. And I told him that I had never had sex be—[*mimics accent*] “Don't worry. I'll be gentle.” Whatever. It was not. It was not harmful, but there was no romance, really. Like I said, it was a transaction, it was like we're going to have sex, I want to have sex, we had some drinks. And then, oh, this is what it is.

Q: And this was your first time having sex?

Vivian: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

Q: And what was your—?

Vivian: I put it on this recording!

Q: Yes.

Vivian: Oh, my goodness.

Q: It is a part of the archive, absolutely. And what was you—?

Vivian: Oh, no. [*Laughter*]

Q: Yeah. And what your first time having sex with a woman?

Vivian: Oh, lord. *[Laughs]* No, that's different.

Q: Was that after you went to the bay area?

Vivian: No, it was here. It was here. So, the teacher that I told you—the magnificent teacher. I for sure—no ifs, ands, or buts—fell in love with my teacher. And I told her. I was honest enough to tell her. Because I couldn't hold it in anymore and I was sick. I was lovesick. And so, I told her, and she was a magnificent teacher, she was a magnificent human being; I will never, ever—I bless her every day of my life because for not one single look or notion or hint or no sign of judgment whatsoever. She was in a relationship with her partner. Of course, you couldn't get married at the time. And then I knew—and her ex-husband was also a teacher. So, we learned about her life somehow. She shared it with us, probably. Because that's the magnificence of the human that she is—she's still alive.

And so, I told her that I—I made an office hour, I said, “I need to talk to you.” I told her I was in love with her. And she said, clearly—and I know the teacher-student, you know, trust that's there, but I wasn't thinking of that at the time. But an important thing is that she told me, she said, “Vivian, that is very important.” I don't think she said I'm flattered; I don't think she said that but “That's very important. And I hear you. I'm in a relationship right now and I don't see that changing.” And of course, my heart sunk, but I could intellectually understand that. There

was no way that we were going to be together or start or have a relationship. And so, she helped me to get through that love sickness, an actual sickness. I was sick. My tummy, my head, everything. And for that, I bless her always.

Now, before or around the time that that happened, I don't think I even mentioned it to my sister. I don't recall. But my sister said after that, having sex with that guy, she said, "I have a friend who lives in San Diego"—cause I asked my sister to go with me to a wedding. These were some missionary couple that I knew in Chile were going to get married. And so, we were going to go to San Diego and she said, "Okay, I'll go with you and we can meet up with my friend, he's gay." And so, for the first time ever, she took me to a gay bar and she held my hand like I was her girlfriend or something so no one would, you know, bother. And that was my first experience going to a gay bar, my sister took me.

And from there on, I ventured off on my own armed with intellectual information first, giving myself permission at age twenty-six to experience sex. And so then, I went to a bar in Pomona called Robbie's [*phonetic*]. And that was a popular bar for Latinos. And so, I went there and my cousin, I think she would be another second or third cousin, her and her sister are also gay. This is on my mother's side, but my grandmother's sister. So, it would be my mother's cousin, you know, her father was my mother's cousin, and then she is my what would be second cousin. Yeah, so anyway, very cool person, we love each other very much. And her and her sister are both gay.

And so, I go there, and, Cindy—she won't mind if I say her name—she was at the bar and she said, "Vivian? Is that you?" And I said, "Yeah." She goes, "What are you doing here? You're a missionary. You're supposed to be in Chile, Juliet [*phonetic*]." And I said, "No, I'm not. [*Laughs*] Here I am." And she was like, just amazed. But she told me later at the time and she was really heavy into drinking. And so, it was shocking to her, but she couldn't really sit there and talk to me because she was dazed in her own world. So, I was there and typical too, like when I would go to junior high dances or dances, I was a wallflower, you know, how do I ask a woman to dance, I've never done that before.

And finally I got up the nerve to ask somebody to dance, a woman. And so, we danced a couple of times and then afterwards, after the bar closed down, we were walking out, same girl, and as we were walking out, she asked me, she said, "Have you ever kissed a woman or have you ever been with a woman?" I said, "No." And so we were at the parking lot and she said, "Well, what are you waiting for?" I said, "I don't know." And so, she kissed me. [*Laughs*] She kissed me, and I was amazed. I was floored because I just knew that I was home in the sense that it made sense. It made complete sense once she kissed me. And I wasn't in love with her, maybe a slight attraction, but not that I was overwhelmed or anything like that, but it was such a warm feeling to be kissed by a woman and to kiss a woman. It was like home; it was like real. It was like, this is real. This is real and this is who I am. And I am very clear about that. I am very clear: this is me.

And so, from there on, I dated her a few times. But then through this professor at Fullerton, she introduced me to two Latina lesbians, Chicana lesbians who identified as Chicana. And they were in a group called Califia. Califia was a woman's collective that was doing in the '80s the

political work of racism, class, sex, women's education, bodily education, as well as religious.

There were religious, like, nuns who were talking about their experiences and coming out as lesbians. I never was included in that because, see, my journey and spirituality prior to that was unconventional.

I didn't go to a mainstream church, you know? I went to an interdenominational place. And, you know, I wasn't wearing a habit, I wasn't wearing a collar, so I couldn't claim that. And then you know, my experience, even if I were, and I was in that circle of conversation, but even if I said I worked as a missionary, who am I? Who is this little Mexican person? You know, I mean, I have felt in my life that I was never taken seriously. I have to tell you that. Even though my experiences are profound, anytime that I would try to give my opinion, share my story, no one really would listen. So, even my friends who knew me at the time, I might have shared I worked at some point as a missionary. That's why Gloria [Anzaldúa] was so different in our intimate friendship. I say intimate because we would really talk, Gloria.

Q: And when you say Gloria, you're referring to?

Vivian: Anzaldúa.

Q: Gloria Anzaldúa.

Vivian: Gloria Anzaldúa. Because she would really listen.

Q: Gloria Anzaldúa, whom you met after you moved to the bay area.

Vivian: That's right, correct.

Q: And we're talking about Califia right now and one of your first experiences with the Bay Area Lesbian of Color Community was at the Califia Women of Color Conference, right?

Vivian: That's correct.

Q: Can you tell us what it was like to attend that conference?

Vivian: It was fantastic. At the time I was working at the Alcoholism Center for Women and so I signed up to do a workshop on something about alcoholism and women or—yeah, wrong place to do a workshop on that. [*Laughs*] But I was naïve, truly naïve. Because I remember, and I have a photo—proof, I have proof of being in a circle with two other friends and one of my friends really liked smoking pot. And so, she said, “Do you want some?” So, I did try some sitting there with her, and like I said, I have the picture to prove it, so I cannot deny that I was hypocritical that weekend. I was always worried about that, you know, that here I am doing a workshop on alcoholism and its effect on the community and women's self-esteem and there I am, you know, smoking pot.

Q: What did it feel like in your body to be at a gathering like that of lesbians of color?

Vivian: Yeah. It was mesmerizing. Again, community, home, this is real, this is who I am. There was a situation that I know that I didn't understand where there was an older woman with a younger woman. And I was like, I don't get that. You know, but I mean, there were all kinds of situations that I didn't get. And women with different body shapes and dressed so differently and free and some, they would do rituals. I think I still have photos of that. I didn't participate like one hundred percent because here again, me, on the fringe, I mentioned to you off-mic that if there is something that people are doing, I don't just run and participate in it; I step back and I observe. So, I was there, and it was beautiful, it was amazing. I did have a crush on one of my friends. Nothing ever came of that. But I know at the time that I was crushing on her, and I had to ask for help of an elder who did spiritual work to really break free from that crush. And so, I did get help with that.

Q: And after this mesmerizing women of color Califia conference, you decided to move—

Vivian: Yes.

Q: —to the bay area?

Vivian: That's right.

Q: How did you make that decision?

Vivian: I lived in L.A. and I had my job and I said, you know, either I do this or not. And I got a friend to sublet my little house in Glendale and I moved up there. And with no job, packed up my car knowing a few people, couch surfed a little, spent some time in my car, got a job at Pacific Bell, and then I know that I think I met Lea who now goes by Tupili Les Arellano I met her. I'm pretty sure I met her in L.A. and then we connected because she was into Native spirituality and stones and crystals and things like that, and I was attracted to that about her. And there was a spirituality. So, that spirituality and in the bay area I also got to explore other areas of spirituality that were tabu in Christianity. Like fortune-telling or reading of the palms, psychic readings, things like that. I became familiar with those areas of spirituality that were considered like devil and demon-ish or something. But I discovered, no, it's not.

So, you know, here I was also exploring other aspects of spirituality that I wasn't satisfied with Christianity, not at all. None whatsoever. There was something more. And so, my quest, my journey to the bay area helped me to open up in that sense. And at the time, Tupili Lea was the manager of a lesbian-owned building. And she told me there was an opening and at the time I could afford that rent for the room, I think it was a single room. And it just so happened that Gloria Anzaldúa was also a tenant. And that's how we met. And so through that friendship—and I have a photo of one time when we went to Berkeley for coffee. I'll see where it's at or send it to you later. But we would have talks or she was a night person so at night, she would smoke her one cigarette—I think it was one. She would say, “I always have to have a cigarette in the middle of the night.”

And so, we would talk and she would show me some of her writings and ask me what I thought of it. And then she would ask me questions about my missionary work and she made me promise, she said, “I’m going to do a book called *De los otros, de las otras*.” *Algo así. Entonces, me dijo, “Quiero que participes si quieres—que escribas para que seas parte de este libro. Y quiero que hables sobre tu experiencia en Chile.” Entonces, como te dije, ella sí me escuchaba profundamente cuando yo le hablaba de mi experiencia como misionera. Ella me respetaba esa parte de mi vida.* And so, I felt honored to be her friend and to be in such close proximity to, you know—and I’m using air quotes— “a writer.” But truly a profound individual and very much like home. Although she was raised in Texas, *pero*, you know, *era como una querida amiga de muchos años. Ella era como abuela, tía, hermana, amante, querida, todo envuelto en uno porque ella era así. Era amor para mí.*

Q: *Era amor.*

Vivian: *Amor.*

Q: *Y parece que pasaron bastante tiempo juntas o juntos.*

Vivian: *Algo de tiempo porque su tiempo estaba limitado. Entonces—*

Q: *¿Pero hubo intimidad?*

Vivian: *Oh, sí. Sí, intimidad digamos. En conversación, no—*

Q: *Sí.*

Vivian: *—no física, no, en una relación personal. No, no. Pero sí.*

Q: *Pero la intimidad emocional era muy real, eso.*

Vivian: *Real. Por seguro, sin lugar a duda. Y como te digo, siempre fue un honor y privilegio cualquier tiempo que ella podía darme. O que podíamos pasar juntas. Sé que fuimos a algunos eventos, algo así en San Francisco. Ella me habló de su amiga Kit, de su amigo Randy. Una de las conversaciones que siempre me dejó impresionada de ella es que hablamos sobre la orientación sexual. Porque ella me dijo, “Yo me considero bisexual, pero solamente a mí. Porque yo siento atracción a hombres y también una atracción a mujeres. Pero por la causa de mujeres, yo prefiero en público, decir que soy lesbiana.”* And so, I was really impressed by that about Gloria, that although there was a very high stigma on identifying as lesbian as opposed to identifying as bisexual, she was willing to accept that sacrifice and so to speak, if I may, accept that cross, you know, if you were using Christian words or ideologies or the story of Jesus and the cross.

Q: You’ve mentioned here the stigma that comes with owning the term lesbian, that came with owning the term lesbian in those times. Does any story rise up for you or any example of how you experienced the stigma of identifying as a lesbian in that time?

Vivian: Yes, definitely. I recall distinctly that while I was going on this experience or experiment, experimenting with my sexuality, I met a wonderful man who was of Filipino descent. He had just arrived not too long ago. And again, it was a different Mexican restaurant, but one that had dancing, and I met him there. Wonderful man, kind, gentle, hard-working. Like I said, Filipino. And I was just coming out. And so, he didn't speak very much English and of course I knew nothing of Filipino, you know, Spanish, he could understand some things.

But long story short, he asked me to marry him. And at that point, I said, "I can't because I think I'm gay." He said, "That doesn't matter. In the Philippines, they're okay with it. You wouldn't believe how many friends I have that have beards." I don't remember how he explained it to me, but it was the idea of a beard. They're married and they have relationships on the side. And so, I knew that I was with an individual who would be okay with that, but the other individual that I had to deal with was me, and I knew that I would not be okay with it. And so, I said to him, "I can't." That's when I knew or understood the stigma of being a lesbian and accepting that cross for myself.

Because although I can truly say that I—I can say even today that I am bisexual. Because I, transactionally, I can have sex with a man and I'm okay with it. I have fallen in love with men because I have met some absolutely wonderful men. And I have wonderful men in my life. You know, some are gay, some are not. But when I experience intimacy, there is no way that I can walk that path because I will never be—I know within myself, I won't be happy. I will always look for a woman or want to be intimate with a woman or—there's something about the feminine. And even if the feminine is bisexual, there's something about being with a woman that

is spiritually, intellectually, emotionally fulfilling. There is no substitute. And like I said, I met—well, I didn't say this, but I met a man in Chile—I never wanted to have children, I told you I was afraid.

Q: Because you lived in Chile for ten years during the dictatorship?

Vivian: I was there for the first—well, I was there in Chile almost like two and a half years or so when I first went as a missionary. I came home, California, went to school, got my bachelor's degree, and then I went back to Chile. And I was in a relationship there.

Q: And that was what year to what year?

Vivian: It was around 1988 to about '98, so just about ten years or so.

Q: During that time.

Vivian: Yeah.

Q: As you talk about your attraction to women and the uniqueness of it, you also said that you experience maleness within you and have from an early age, right?

Vivian: Yes.

Q: Can you talk about how your understanding of your own gender evolved over time after you came out as a lesbian?

Vivian: Yeah. We're influenced by our culture, and so because I thought, okay, my label, I'm labelling myself as a lesbian, but I am the masculine, I'm the masculine one. In other words, I'm the one that has to make sure I have a job, make sure I can support, you know, make sure I open the door and do all these gentlemanly, masculine things. That's kind of like where I was at. The journey of that. Well, it really didn't get me anywhere as far as being able to find a relationship here in the states. Many women, and I guess maybe because I worked at the Alcoholism Center for Women and I did workshops for women and self-esteem, I observed the pain and the dysfunction and the immaturity of us as women, whether lesbians or however identified. And it was difficult to find someone who had their shit together.

No, I dated a few women, but no one that really wanted to continue a relationship with and the one that—the first one that I—this was experiencing sex for the first time was with a woman that I met—I don't think I was going in the right direction but here we are—that I met at an art show. We clicked, we exchanged numbers, she, I learned later, had been in the military. She was just come out of the military and her father was a butcher, so she got a job as a butcher. And so, she had a relationship when she was in the military. And somehow that was ongoing, but I had no idea because the relationship we had, we had not gotten to the point of really revealing everything about our lives or past lives, things like that.

So, the point is is that it was with her that I was able to trust her enough. She was beautiful by, the way, but a little more butchy—okay, this is the contradictory thing. She had long, curly hair like a little past her shoulders, beautiful, but she had kind of a butchy demeanor, but a little—because of her hair and I guess her flirtatiousness, she was kind of femmy, too. You know, I’m using these words, sorry people. But these are the words that we were given [*laughs*] when growing up gay, okay? Maturing gays. Femmy butch, butchy femme, soft butch, hard butch, you know, whatever these hard-core things. I’ve always had a hard time with these labels, but—

Q: We had such different language in earlier—

Vivian: Yes.

Q: —in earlier times of queer history –

Vivian: That’s right.

Q: —than now. And so, I wonder in those times, how did you identify? Did you identify as butch or any of the other words in there or not?

Vivian: I would have to say—[*laughs*] why do I find this embarrassing? I would identify if I looked at myself, I would say I am a butchy femme because I’m not femmy. I’m not femmy, and I don’t feel femmy, so I would have to say butchy femme or then later they came up with the term soft butch, which is funny, it’s hilarious.

Q: Did you resonate with that hilarious term, soft butch, or no?

Vivian: [*Laughs*] Well, again, like I said, if I had to choose a label, I guess that would be it because I wasn't hard-core. Yeah, I wish I could have worked in construction and worn construction boots or whatever, but that was never part of the build—even though I have a body like a Mexican mariachi or Punjabi man, but no. This is a [*laughs*] stalky-built body and so I just kind of had to look at myself—yes, I guess there was the femmy part because I'm a woman, you know?

And the thing about it is that it's not easy to be a woman. Let me tell you. And I have met women who identify as lesbians but then when it comes down to being a woman and the various things that are entailed in being a woman, I would say that there's no—they are not behaving like women, if I can say that. It's kind of strange for me to say that, but I have met women who identify as lesbians who I thought you don't have any idea what it's like to be a woman. I mean, you don't act like a woman. I guess maybe what I'm saying is that there was an immaturity there that I would experience that was more like a girl. Girlish behavior rather than womanly behavior. Hard to explain. And I really would like to explore that more.

Q: You refer to being a woman, living as a woman, identifying as a woman, and you do identify as a woman, and you also identify as non-binary.

Vivian: That's right. And that's the—

Q: You claim both.

Vivian: Both, both. Because tell me to choose a love song, and I'm going to choose the male voice and I'm going to sing my heart out and throw my body on the ground and let the woman that I'm in love with step all over me or if there's mud, she can cross on my body and I'll be the macho one so she doesn't get her feet wet. But—

Q: Would you say that that's the maleness in you?

Vivian: That's the male, yeah, for sure. For sure, yeah.

Q: You identify as a woman, do you also identify as male?

Vivian: I do. I do, it's crazy. Now, what do I know about being a man? There you could question me, because I don't know much about what it is to be a man, but I do know that I have been culture— *¿Cuál es la palabra?* Acculturated or socialized that—well, I've always believed that men should treat women with respect even though that hasn't been my experience with my siblings or my father. No, I did not get that role modeling from any of them. No. On the contrary. Disrespectful. But just because they were disrespectful—here again, going back to me and my tenacity, my purpose, I didn't want to be a part of that world.

So, for me, it was I wanted to be a respectful and I want to be a respectful man to the woman that I am with. And so, well, being a man, being male, basically it's just having permission to love a woman if that's what I need to identify and say that my attraction and my desire is toward a woman. Because I guess I am hanging on to that little piece of maleness to say that it gives me permission to love a woman even though, yes, I have experienced love between women, woman-to-woman love. I have experienced that, so I know what that is.

But there's this little cultural vehicle and word that helps me to know where I'm at, that I am attracted to woman, therefore, I identify the male part of me to allow myself to be attracted to women. But with or without it, given the years that I've had, over the years, I don't just fall in love with a woman because she's a woman. There are components to it; there's a spiritual, there's an intellectual, the creative, the humor. There's so much more entailed to being attracted to a woman than just, oh, she's a woman, oh, she's gay or she identifies as queer. No. There has to be much more. It's something more—there is also a spiritual quality about that.

Q: So, for you identifying as non-binary includes being male and being a woman?

Vivian: Yes, it does. Now, let me tell you something. There was a time when I was not feeling well and I was visiting my sister. Now, all of this talk about non-binary, like I said, I was making fun and feeling embarrassed about butch, all these words. When people at church started talking about, I identify as queer, trans, whatever, non-binary—there's some other words, I don't even remember right now. But I poo-pooed it, I just put it off to the side cause I'm like, oh, my goodness. Maybe I'm too old for this and I'm not going to—this is just not me. No. I don't

know. I'm not dealing with this well. And then of course I started listening—well, through also—I started watching, when I was ill, a serious illness in 2018-2019—well, up to I'm dealing with it now.

But in 2019, because I was in the hospital, because I was so ill, I was awake at night and I would watch a new late-night program. I've always been into late night. But there was this program called A Little Late with Lily Singh. And I'm like, who is this? And Lilly Singh was introducing—so I really enjoyed the late-night show and then it went into season two. Season two is where I was introduced by Lilly Singh on television to Alok. And when Alok was talking—see how I need the intellectual? What he was saying about the words and the nomenclature, the labels and things that were happening and how he was—how they were identifying themselves, I began to understand differently and then I began to question myself in a serious way.

Q: And that was which year?

Vivian: That was somewhere around 2020 or so.

Q: So, you started to question how that might relate to your own identity. And can you tell us the story of when you first identified as non-binary?

Vivian: Yes. I clearly remember. And now I'm getting back to when I was not—I went up north to visit my siblings in Redding and I wasn't feeling well. I told my sister to take me to the

hospital. And so in the ER, they had an electronic admission form and on that form—and I was not feeling well. And so, I was just there and when it requested my signature, along with the signature, it said: How do you identify: male, female, or non-binary? And I'm thinking, if I'm going to die, and this is going to be on my whatever the certificate is here, then I'm going to check off non-binary because truly when it comes down to the real nitty gritty, the '60s song, I am non-binary.

I am both male and female and the native language expresses itself saying two spirit. I am two spirit. There is a synergy within me that is both male and female. I can feel it. Because I'm also intuitive and I have plunged the depths of my spiritual life and connection to the universe, I feel that there is a flow and a back-and-forth that is so much a part of my life. But it's sanity for me because if I had to be one or the other, I would be crazy. I would not be able to function as a human being. So, it was then that I thought, I'm going to have to take this seriously.

Q: And that was at the age of—?

Vivian: Well, let's see, sixty-five. [*Laughs*]

Q: That was at the age of sixty-five that you said I'm going to take this seriously.

Vivian: I'm going to take this seriously. And I even mentioned it to my roommate, my friend. And I told her about Alok, and I read their book and my friend is always very supportive of any

conversation or material related to queer—she’s not queer, but that’s the way her family was raised, always accepting. And she’s just a phenomenal person, so that’s just the way she is.

Q: Can you tell us about your current relationship to pronouns and what your pronouns mean to you?

Vivian: So, my pronouns right now—I identify—if someone says Vivian is handsome, that’s a compliment. Or at Bienestar [Human Services], one of the things I love about my transgender sisters is that I have some sisters that will call me *Papi*. [Laughs] And I’m like, you really know me. You know, I feel like, [laughs] okay, you know me. Cause it makes me feel good. It makes me feel good. And so, I feel better if somebody calls me *Papi* than I do if somebody calls me *Mami*. Like some people for *cariño*, they’ll say *mamita* or some—no. You know, throw up, you know, time, no. No, no, no, no, no.

There is an excellent song by queer—I’m trying to remember the name of the band, but it’s popular now. Cumbia [Queers]. But it’s a Cumbia and it’s called *No Me Digas Señora* because it’s—I don’t know if you’ve heard it. Have you heard it? Oh, my God! I have to play that song for you. It’s *No me digas señora* because it’s like look, [laughs] do not call me ma’am, okay? Do not call me ma’am! And you know, we still get that. And no, I cringe. I cringe. Just call me Vivian or sir. When I have been called sir, I’m okay with it. I’m really good. One time on one of my airline tickets, which I did save, it said Mr. Vivian Varela. I was like, yes, that’s me! [Laughs] You know, but I conform, and I accept Ms., you know Ms. I conform. But see, there again, [Caro], I don’t identify, or I am choosing not to identify as transgender. I understand that.

Q: Would you like to say more about your reasons for not identifying as transgender?

Vivian: Yeah. Because I do not have a feeling of—what is that word that they say like dysphoria or a disconnect? I haven't delved into it that much, but some I have. And we have over the years with movies and things like that. But I don't feel a disconnect with my body. I am satisfied with being in the body of a woman. And because not only the human sexuality class, but because I worked as a health educator at Bienestar Human Services in Los Angeles, it was a grant that was given specifically for lesbians to educate them about cervical cancer. I ended up having to learn more about the female anatomy.

And that included the vagina, the clitoris, and all of the female organs. And I discovered in this, from what I've read in these medical books, that the clitoris is not that far from how a penis functions. Except that I don't recall if there is an ejaculate. I don't recall if that is in there, but other—how can you say this—natural functions of the clitoris and the vagina and the erogenous zones, not much different than a male. And so, I'm happy with my body and how it functions with my libido and how that works. And then I'm grateful that it still does. You know, it's still alive and well. I had to make sure that I got that on the recording. Okay, folks? You got it. You heard it here directly from me, okay? *[Laughs]*

So, it's funny because our teacher, the teacher that we had for human sexuality—brilliant—she told us and showed us the whole gamut of human sexuality from birth to death. But in that, of course, elderly. And she showed us pictures of elderly couples. That doesn't matter. This is one

of the things that she explained, is that the sexual desire part of being human does not die until you die. Unless there's some kind of trauma. That part of you will always exist and be active as long as you are being loved, cherished, cared for, reciprocated. Just that whole thing and that's one of the things that I loved about intellectually understanding what human sexuality is about.

Q: Yes. Thank you. So, would you like to say within this recording what your current pronouns are?

Vivian: Oh, my current pronouns, okay. I was skipping over that, right? I won't skirt the issue; I won't run away. *[Laughs]* Yes, I identify, if you look at my IG [Instagram] description, two spirit. I love the pronouns she/hers or he/his. And I have given myself my own label, which is a happy queerdo in the queerdome. So, I am considering myself to be a member of the queerdome because I believe that—well, there was some kind of an enlightenment that happened within me when I thought of this, that there is a queerdome. And we are part of it. All of us who are queer.

And you can be heterosexual, and you can be queer because that means that you know that your orientation is not all of who you are, that being in the queerdome is accepting yourself for who you are, loving who you love and letting yourself be loved, and let's get over—remember I told you that I really had a judgement and a question about age? We have to get over that. I used to have some qualms about that but there are certain circumstances—in Hollywood there's an example of Holland Taylor and her spouse, Sarah Paulson, and they what is considered a large age difference. But they are so much in love. And it's a beautiful coupling and they are a beautiful example of love. And that's what I am talking about when I talk about queerdome.

So, yes, I am male, female, two spirit, happy queerdo in queerdom. And if you want to make me happy, address me his, “This is his water.” I’m fine with it. Or sir. My sister would tease me. I would say, “Trish” and call her, and she would say, “Yes, sir?” [*Laughs*] And so, in that respect. Yeah, I do. I do have a tendency to identify more on the male side, but there again, if I’m with someone who can also navigate the male and the female aspect of them, I’m your woman, I’m your girl. [*Laughter*] I am there.

Q: My last question for you today: What do you want younger generations of LGBTQ+ people of color to most know or see about your generation?

Vivian: Know and see that we, in our own individual ways, have been in battle. And the battle is for our own integrity. [*Shows emotion*] And what that means is that whether your mother wanted to dress you in dresses or wanted you to walk in a more feminine way, you, me, I had to stand my ground. And the mistakes that I’ve made in relationships, friendships, growing up, the integrity for me was knowing that—well, we use the word different. I don’t know if that’s going to change, but I am unique. I am an individual. And even my queerness is expressed uniquely. There is no one like me. There is no one like you.

And so, the key point is to maintain that integrity, have that tenacity of spirit as you go through life. Tenacity, someone says you can’t do that. Well, yes you can. You find a way. Someone said, “You cannot move. You’re sixteen years old, you cannot move your family out of Corona.” I don’t know how the hell I did it, but I did it. And so, is there an actual war? Yes, there is. There

is a war that you can't always see with your eyes, but you know it's happening. When I walk out of this door, because of the way I choose to dress, if it's kind of like a male-looking shirt and some pants and tennis shoes, I know that I am not identifying myself in a feminine way. It's a masculine way. Even though I am in a female body.

So, I would just say maintain your integrity and find people who love you for the unique individual that you are and hopefully you have the privilege and honor of having at least just one friend. At least one friend who will listen to you. And if that friend is not your lover or partner or spouse, that's okay. At least you have one friend that you can share and talk to and expound your thoughts and get your thoughts out. That is very, very important. Do not isolate. Find someone. If you have to start with therapy so that you can get back on track, okay, do it. But do not isolate. Do not isolate. And don't make yourself try to fit in. You just have to be yourself. Even if it means you only have one great friend. Because you're not going with the crowd. You have to be yourself all the way, all the way.

Q: Vivian Varela, thank you so, so much for everything that you've given and brought to this incredible time together and to the archive. And to the world. *Muchísimas gracias.*

Vivian: *De nada, pues. A ti.*

[END OF INTERVIEW]