

I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Adela Vázquez

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 Adela Vazquez conducted by Caro De Robertis on November 17, 2022. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders Oral History Project.

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

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Narrator: Adela Vázquez      Location: San Francisco, CA

Interviewer: Caro De Robertis      Date: November 17, 2022

Q: Adela, muchísimas gracias por recibirme en su casa y esta conversación. Realmente es un honor tremendo.

Vázquez: Y para mí también. Muchas gracias.

Q: Por favor, dígame su nombre y quién es usted.

Vázquez: Adela Vázquez, soy cubana. ¿Quién soy yo?

Q: Como quiera contestar.

Vázquez: Soy una hippie. Vieja ya con tremenda experiencia de la vida. Happy by nature. Y dos de mis terapistas me han dicho que yo soy muy intensa. Y me da una risa tremenda porque [laughs] yo no lo quiero, solame—yo presto atención y soy escorpio, y por eso que nunca que me callo, porque hablo mucho. Pero, ¿quién soy? Una ranchina que nació en Cuba y vive en el extranjero. En otras palabras.

Q: Muchísimas gracias. ¿Y dónde y cuándo nació?

Vázquez: En Cien Central Azucarero en Cuba, un pueblito pequeño que se llamaba en aquel momento Najasa y luego cuando entró Fidel [Castro], se convirtió en el Central Azucarero Alfredo Álvarez Mora, que era un héroe de la patria que hizo algo que no se fue el uno. No recuerdo qué fue lo que hizo.

Q: ¿Y el año?

Vázquez: 1958, noviembre trece. Vengo de una familia media, de clase media. Tengo una mamá, pero esa parte de mi vida es bien, bien emocionante. Yo soy producto de mi mamá y una persona que—mi mamá iba a la escuela en Santiago de Cuba [Cuba] que está en—en este momento de otra provincia, la provincia oriente, es oriente, Camagüey. So, mi mamá iba allí en casa de una tía qué sé yo y se quedaba allí hasta el verano, regresaba a la casa y estas cosas. Y ya mi mamá tenía dieciocho años e iba a una escuela de monjas y caminaba hasta la escuela. Se quedaba con mi tía. No era interna, pero estaba todo el día en la escuela y dormía en la casa de mi tía.

En esa trayectoria, mi mamá—en ese momento, por lo que era la moda y por cómo eran las cosas, los cincuenta, mi mamá—las personas modelaban en vivo en las vidrieras. Y mi papá era un modelo de vidrieras, aparentemente. Él era de la inteligencia [Fulgencio] Batista [Zaldívar], de servicios inteligencia militar de Batista y se fue de Cuba muy al principio. Y ahí pues que yo no lo conozco, no tuve contacto con mi padre ni con su familia. So, yo solamente he tenido contacto con la familia de mi mama. Cuando yo hablo de mi familia, estoy hablando solamente de la familia maternal.

Es una familia materna que es como una novela. Mi abuela, que era la matrona, quien mandaba, mi abuela era cubana. Bien cubana. Y mi abuelo era español, español de nacimiento. Y vino a Cuba con su papá que predicaba la Biblia. Él se quedó viudo, el papá de mi abuelo, y vino a Cuba con su papá y su hermana. Y el señor predicaba la Biblia. Mi abuelo era un señor que había querido ser cura y siempre fue a la escuela. Era un señor muy inteligente, era un maestro de azúcar y tenía muchos skills, con sus manos, hacía muchas cosas artesanales. Porque ya ves que se vive en un central azucarero, va a trabajar seis meses del año y seis meses va a descansar porque la caña tiene que crecer para que pudiera hacer azúcar.

Entonces, lo llaman el tiempo muerto. En el tiempo muerto, hacía miles de cosas. A mí me adoró. Ellos me criaron—mis abuelos me criaron desde el día que yo nací porque mi mamá se enamoró de este hombre y se va con él a vivir. De jovencita, mi tía le avisa a mi abuela y le dice, “Oye, me está pasando esto,” y quería - “porque se ha ido y no sabemos qué pasa.” Y me han dicho que mi abuela inmediatamente se va a la ciudad, busca a mi mamá y casi la divorcian en el mismo día y se la lleva preñada ya para la finca donde vivíamos. Y el Señor no le permiten—ya le digo que la cosa es que no lo divorció en el mismo día solamente para estar bien con Dios.

Y cuando yo nací, mi abuela inmediatamente me adoptó como su hijo. En los papeles, mi mamá era mi hermana y mi abuela y mi abuelo son mis padres. Yo sabía que esto pasaba; yo decía, abuelo era abuelo, mami era mami, pero yo nunca tuve el respecto de madre con mi mamá. Mi abuela era mi mamá, que se ocupaba de mí, que me crió desde el día que nací. Y bien mimada. Yo hacía lo que me daba la gana con mi vida. Desde muy temprano, cuando yo quise una

muñeca, mi abuela me la compró. Yo nunca tuve problemas en mi casa por ser quien yo era.

Gracias a Dios.

Q: Y cuando dice que no tuvo problemas por ser quien era—

Vázquez: Siendo homosexual.

Q: Homosexual, ¿o era un varón femenino, o?

Vázquez: Yo sabía que yo era homosexual desde el principio.

Q: ¿Desde qué edad sabía eso?

Vázquez: Muy joven. Cinco, seis años, cuatro años posiblemente.

Q: ¿Tiene alguna memoria de esa época, de su infancia, de saber o sentir—?

Vázquez: Sí, como no. Yo era una persona bien precoz. Crecí en una finca sola con mis abuelos.

Entonces, los niños vienen a jugar, y siempre terminábamos haciendo sexo.

Q: ¿A qué edad?

Vázquez: Seis años. Yo comencé a tener sexo a los seis años. Con mis amiguitos de la escuela. A la hora de jugar, yo jugaba con las hembras, yo también tenía mi cocinita, mis muñecas—yo era una hembra. Y a los nueve años, mandé una carta a los Reyes Magos y les dije a los Reyes Magos que no quería que me trajeran ningún juguete más de varón, que yo era hembra. Y yo siempre me sentí mujer.

Q: Y su abuela, que era como su madre, ¿aceptaba esto, le daba muñecas?

Vázquez: Sí, mi abuela me compraba muñecas, me decía, “No las puedes sacar por la calle, pero es tu muñeca.” Mi muñeca negra, bellísima, una bebé negra.

Q: Dentro de la casa, ¿respectaba esa—?

Vázquez: Dentro de la casa, yo jugaba con cuquitas. Cuquitas son las paper dolls. Yo siempre fui hembra en mi vida. Y una niña. Me criaron como una niña, me acostumbré—yo iba a la playa con mis abuelos, íbamos a la playa todos—y ya viejitos, porque ellos eran viejitas—y me llevaban y todo. Y me acuerdo una vez de una conversación con una señora que le decía a mi abuela, “¿Y ese niño que tiene cuerpo de mujer?” Y mi abuelo le dijo, “Ese es mi nieto.”  
[Laughs] Pero ellos nunca—yo me maquillaba y yo era bien femenina creciendo.

Q: ¿A qué edad se maquillaba?

Vázquez: Toda la vida pero bueno, para salir a la calle, I came out the closet—bueno, my family always knew because a los nueve años, ya le digo que mandé esta carta a los Reyes, me llevaron al psiquiatra, “Este es un niño normal, solamente homosexual, pero normal.” Ya habían estudiado; mi abuela fue la primera maestra rural de esa comarca donde vivíamos. Mi abuelo era ingeniero de azúcar, mi mamá fue a la escuela. Entonces, sabían. Sabían que yo era. Y aparte de eso, le he contado que en mi familia había muchos homosexuales. Así que, yo no era la primera.

Nunca como yo. Yo fui bien, bien, bien, bien, bien, bien, sabes. No me portaba. No me portaba. Además, yo vengo—como le dije, soy una hippie. Yo nací, yo crecí oyendo a música de Los Beatles a clandestinas, porque no se permitía en Cuba. Crecía con aquello de los hippies, del pelo largo, la campana, el pantalón campana. Una hippie. Y en el campo. Esto estoy hablando—yo nací siempre en el campo. Y todos los veranos me salían, me sacaban y me llevaban a centros turísticos. Yo era una niña mimada.

Q: Y ahora que usted es una mujer líder en su comunidad de sesenta y cuatro años y una mujer transgénero, reflexionando sobre esa parte de su infancia, ¿qué significa para usted que usted tuvo esa aceptación?

Vázquez: Mucho. Significa mucho porque me ha dado tremenda confianza, confianza en lo que estoy haciendo con mi vida. Yo valoro mi vida de esta manera: yo soy inmigrante, llevo aquí ya veinte años, sin ningún tipo de guidance. Solamente observo porque la desconfianza es muy grande cuando uno migra. En inmigración he conocido a personas que jamás hubiera pensado que iba a conocer. Asesinos, delincuentes. I was very sheltered. Y I went to boarding school

from an age of ten all the way down to twenty, nineteen. I was just fresh out of school when I came here.

Q: ¿Y cuándo salió del closet? ¿Fue en el boarding school?

Vázquez: No. Yo tenía como trece años y tenía un primo homosexual. Que fue la first person en my family that I told him that I was gay. And he was also gay. And he was an architect living in Santiago de Cuba. And in the summers, my family allowed me to go with him. He lived by himself and everything and he would take care of me. And he did. He always made sure that I was—he knew who I was and I was the minor. But he would take me to places where I—he exposed me to homosexuality in a way that I had never seen it before.

And I say that this is the coming out because I remember that I was in boarding school, I was thirteen, and my grandmother came and told me, “When you come home”—I was allowed to come home every 21 days for a weekend. So, when I came home that time, there was a letter. I had met this gay man. We never really had sex, but I liked him very much. I liked how he was feminine, and he was leader and all this stuff in the '70s, early '70s. And I was fascinated by this. And we became friends. And he sent—and you know, he was my boyfriend. But we never really slept, I was too young. Not because I wasn't sleeping around—I was sleeping around.

Q: When you were thirteen, you were sleeping around?

Vázquez: Since the age of six—

Q: Onward.

Vázquez: Onward. Until like five years ago that I stopped having sex. I had a lot of sex in my life, I had a lot of dicks in my life. Plenty of dick. And around eighteen, I slept for the first time with a girl.

Q: And was it mostly with people your age, or did that change?

Vázquez: I never been raped. I never been raped. Only in 1997, when I was an adult. But as a young guy, never. I tell you why: the place where I grew up, that little town, my grandmother was a teacher and when I became school-aged, she was the principal in the school. So, I was well-liked, everybody knew everybody. And so, I grew up with—the kids that were in my school, I had sex with them. Everybody knew that I was a girl, in a way. I didn't have to have tits or take hormones. Everybody knew.

Q: Did they see you as a—

Vázquez: As a homose—

Q: —a gay, effeminate boy, or did they see you as a girl, or both?

Vázquez: No, no, not a girl per se—I thought I was a girl. They thought of me as an effeminate person that they were comfortable to have sex with. I’m talking about my girlfriends’ boyfriends. And in the time that I was born, I fuck everybody. No exception.

Q: And looking back, what do you think that meant for you, that you had this childhood and young adolescence where you were sexually active?

Vázquez: But you know what? Later on, after I came here, I discovered that sex was a way to obtain things. I discovered it was a power tool. I never really—well, at the beginning, being a dumb teenager, I thought I was ugly, and it was a method that my mom used to tear me down. It was cruel and I will talk about it. There was a lot of things that I didn’t solve with my mother because I wasn’t old enough to realize that these things were happening in my life. So, no pude sen—mi mamá—yo tenía mucho resentment con mi mamá. Me regaló de niño, dejó de—no me conoció como tenía que haber—nunca me dijo nada de mi papá jamás. Todo lo que yo sé, me lo dijeron otras personas.

Which has really helped me because it’s like not at the top of everything you never really like—so anyway, back to the beginning. My grandmother took my mom, she brought her back to the town and she have me there and when I was five years old, my mom remarried. My mom was getting ready to marry this guy that had a beautiful black Cadillac in the ’60s. A very handsome man, whatever. And when she was about to get married, and two weeks before the wedding or whatever, this lady come in and she was pregnant. And she was the wife of this guy. So, that

causes a big chaos around the family. My grandmother called my mom names, called her a puta, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

And my family had a car shop, like body works and mechanics and stuff. And one of the people that was learning there was this young guy from the neighborhood, whatever, and he was poor, and my mom left the house with him. She took me with her. And his family was like—he came from like this fisherman's town in Manzanillo [Cuba], which is a fairly big city in the Oriente, but it was like very poor people, not to my taste. And I was a fat kid. I was a fat, loud, queeny, little kid. And I lost a bunch of weight and I stopped—and I remember coming back, my mom—because my mom, I guess just to hurt—she did this, to hurt my grandmother not to really love me. Because she knew that was a tool to control my grandmother.

I remember when we were coming back, we took a train in the middle of the night there. So, it was like three or four in the morning and there was this street, the back of the house where my grandmother was, this was the back, but everybody come in through the back. I don't know why. It was half a block but it was very quiet, it was at night. So, I came to my grandmother, “¡Abuela!” And she came out and they both—my grandmother and my grandmother, they both came out—I've got an image in my mind—I was five years old. They came out and there was some words, whatever, I run to them. And I never again lived with my mother until then, yes. It was very traumatic, traumatic.

It was hard. I didn't have no father, and I remember the first time I asked my grandmother why I don't have no father. And her answer was, “You do have a father. Grandfather is your father.”

You know what I mean? So, in a way, the love that I got from them—both of them. I was ten years old when my grandfather died. So, he didn't—he drive crazy, but he was very wise man. I remember my time with him was beautiful. I wanted to have—I remember Robinson Crusoe and I read a lot as a little kid. At four years old, I was reading in school in first grade. Four years old.

So, it was very early in my life because I grew up in this environment. My mom was a teacher and my grandmother was a teacher. So, I was surrounded by all this, books and school. So, to me, going to school, it was very easy. I was a smart kid. Smart, very smart in many ways. Smart with my materials at school and smart, like, fast. You know, I grew up with old people, adults. And in my generation, I was the first: I was the first grandkid, the first nephew, the first—you know what I mean? All these things.

Q: And you said that there was this letter that arrived from this older friend. Is that part of your coming out—?

Vázquez: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. That's my coming out story. So, my grandmother opened it because nobody never wrote me a letter. And all of a sudden, I have this letter and she opened it up. And in this letter, he talks about how he was going to fuck me and how we were going to do—we never really had sex and he died early. He came to this country in 1980 but he died, and I never got to see him. We were very good friends. And they all loved me because I was a little kid. I was thirteen years old. So this cute little kid, you know what I mean, just discovering—like you have a thirteen-year-old. So, that's what happened. And my grandmother let me do whatever. So, this is a nice story.

So, I come down for dinner—there's no coming down, I just came out of my room and go to the dining room and they were there and everybody's—whenever I came, every twenty-one days to home, everybody would get together. My aunts would come over, my grandmother would cook a nice dinner. Just to see me, you know? Because like I said, I was well-liked. Regardless that they don't know this. And then my grandmother said, "Would you like to explain yourself? This is what's up." And then she showed me the letter. And I knew back that that it was like, okay. I just know, like, this is it. And I told them. And it was my mother—my mother had a husband. This guy that I told you that they were together for a long time, for twenty-some years. And he asked me, "So, are you a maricón? ¿Tú eres maricón?" "Sí, soy." Yo le dije, "Ustedes todos lo saben. Esto no es una cosa de las nuevas."

Q: How did you feel in that moment saying, "¿Esto es—?"

Vázquez: Very empowered, very empowered.

Q: ¿Sí?

Vázquez: Very empowered.

Q: And you did not at that age experience shame around the word "maricón"?

Vázquez: No, because I knew I was. I knew I was. My problem was—I had no problem with being who I was. It was other people that had a problem with me. For real. I did not thought about—I knew what I was, you know what I mean? And I knew why I didn't like girls that way, you know? And I love girlfriends, and I love to play with them, and their dolls talk about dresses and stuff. Pero not sexually. I was awful as a little kid, I always was thinking of sex and I fuck all the guys at school.

Q: And you had the ability to accept yourself and embrace yourself even at that age.

Vázquez: Very age [*sic*].

Q: But how did your family react?

Vázquez: So, my stepfather said—no, he wasn't my stepfather, he was my mom's husband. He told me, like, "So, are you a maricon?" And I said, "Yes." And he said this: "But you have to leave this house." And my grandmother said, "Wait a minute. If anybody needs to leave this house, it's you because you're not part of this family." Straight up. Strike number one, I was like, I already won the war. And she told me, "And you, you better behave. This is your family, this is your house, you don't need to bring your shit or anything" not with this word but, "No puedes traer ningún hombre aquí ni nada de eso. Respectas para que te respeten" My grandparents treated me like that, you know?

My grandfather would say something—when I did something wrong, he would tell me to behave like a human. That type of wording. The word educated, period. Do you know what I mean? And they have the same problems that everybody else has, that they got old, and they were funny, and they sometimes didn't understand who I was. You know, I had those little issues, but overall, my family empowered me to this day. Sixty-four years later, I still talk about it, and I think—when I go cooking, I have my grandmother with me. I remember getting the bed flu here in this house like in 2005. And I was very sick, and Nelson told me that I was delirious, and I was calling for my grandmother. To this day. You know what I mean? It's amazing what they gave me. They gave me an amazing life. All the way up to the day that I left. Very spoiled. For that, I'm so happy. Because it prepared me for life. No problem.

Q: It sounds like you—

Vázquez: Went to boarding school—I left my house at ten years old, and I never came back.

Q: Never came back?

Vázquez: Never came back.

Q: So, what were those years like—well, I just want to pause and say thank you so much for that story and I think it will mean a lot to a lot of people to hear. And to hear—

Vázquez: I've said it many times, but it's a beautiful story.

Q: I mean, it is. And a person of your generation who knows what it's like to be loved.

Vázquez: I grew up on an orange farm full of gallinas y patos y chivos y vacas, you know what I mean? And I grew up, I had sex with a chiva. This is how you realized who you were. In a very country way. And when times was tough—when I grew up, I left. After school, after I finished, I could not stay there. I couldn't stay in Cuba. I knew that I needed to leave because everybody was going to jail. In Cuba, they take you to jail for the smallest things. If they catch you on the corner selling a pound of rice, which is like the most—if it's rice that you bought with your money and you want to resell it, it's your problem, they put you in jail.

Q: Can you talk about how you made your way to realizing you had to leave Cuba?

Vázquez: Yes. So, at thirteen I came out to my family, after that, who was going to stop me? You know what I mean? I was in boarding school—fourteen, fifteen, sixteen; this is when you are jumping, your hormones are jumping. My free time, the summer and stuff, I would go on my own to places and make friends. And I had queeny friends that were my friends. We'd go out to concerts, and we'd go to dance, and we'd go to quinceañeras, makeup on and yes. I remember going to school full of makeup. And they sent me back home but, *[laughs]* full on. Full on makeup. And it was—I was very daring. It was the fashion, it was the fashion, it was, strings, bell-bottoms, big buckles, very tight. I was in line waiting for the bus and, “Tú eres la última?” Las personas no sabían si era un hombre o una mujer. Porque era bien—I started super young.

Q: ¿Le decían última?

Vázquez: Última. Me trataban de mujer. In the carnivals—you know, you were not supposed to do this—and I would dress like a girl, and I'd come out and I always was a girl. Always, since I remember, from very young. And I remember when I was a little kid—ten, eleven, even in boarding school—wishing there was a fairy godmother that would come and change me into a girl and change everything around. Because a fairy godmother can do that, you know what I mean? *[Laughs]*

Q: And you remember wishing for that?

Vázquez: I have a vivid memory of me growing up, and these things, I remember guys that I fucked that I liked very much and I was very young. I remember situations where I was—I remember when I started going out—you know what it's like, when you start drinking and all that. Yes. Yes. I mean, I did drugs in Cuba, I took pills and weed and stuff when smoking weed in Cuba was like taboo. Like heroin here. I don't know why. So, among all this beautiful life—from age thirteen to twenty-one, I went out every night. Just to hang out with my friends.

When I was in boarding school, there we had to go to bed at eleven and I would escape the school which was really close to the city, take a bus—I think it was number nine bus—and then you go and then you hang out in the park and then before it's like five o'clock in the morning, you have to run back to the school and you sneak into the—I mean, before it was daylight, you

had to come back and go sneak into school and it's like I slept there all night. I was very tired in school [*laughs*] and all that. Yes. I did that into like tenth grade, and then at the middle of tenth grade, I decided there was no more boarding school. So, I left boarding school for a minute.

First, I lived in my grandmother's house, but the schools that I wanted to go to, they were not schools that was close. So, I had to take the bus every day to different cities. And so, I moved with my aunt to the city because—it was like my mom's little sister. And I lived there for a while, for like a couple of years and I finished. And then from there, when I finished whatever, we call it, pre-university, which is high school here, when I finished that—and I wanted to get something fast. And there was this something show up in the school that was like you become a teacher in thirty months. You have to go thirty months to school, straight to school—no vacation or anything—and then you become a teacher. And then as you were teaching, you go to school on Saturdays and I start doing that, but then I come here.

Q: And how did you decide to come here? What happened?

Vázquez: I knew that I wanted to leave. I knew that I wanted to leave since I was ten. This is my dream come true, coming to America. I knew that I had to leave to be free, to be myself. And I love reading; I'm a person that reads. That's why internet for me is just like the window to the world. I'm a total nerd when it comes to internet, and I can read forever. I read everything. I read the news in the morning and the full, I read like three different newspapers, three Cuban newspapers and HuffPost [Huffington Post]. I'm totally into it.

Q: A reader, you're a lifelong reader.

Vázquez: I like to read, and I always have things to read. I like television; I like to watch—right now, I have internet. It's like give me all these things. I watch movies, I watch series, I like good theater, I like good acting, I like good books. The simple things of life. I like doing embroidery, I like to sew. And I do that all the time. I can cook. So, I totally entertain myself; I always have something to do. I cook every day, I cook my meals. I can't really eat at restaurants anymore. When I was younger, not anymore. I can't really. I like my food. I can cook very well. And I can think of something and go to the kitchen and search it and make it.

And it's a good way to be poor. Because life is all about who you are and continuously you are reminded of your poverty when you live in America. It's a beautiful place to live—I have achieved freedom. I have been in Burning Man, and that's to me—many times. Four times. And that's like freedom. That's do whatever you want.

Q: Burning Man is the pinnacle of freedom.

Vázquez: Yes, it is. It is, it is, it is. And it's just amazing that I have experienced that. I didn't realize—not until then I'd expect so much Americans [*sic*], it's like wow. It's a pyrotechnic show. You know what I mean? And it's very white. Not anymore, but at the beginning when—I remember starting to go, it was very white and it's very American. It's an American—it's an expression of capitalists. When you have so much time and things that you can just throw a party

with this lavish—a city is built in the middle of the desert in a week. And you have an amazing time.

Q: It's a real example, right, of some of the things that are true about the United States of America—

Vázquez: Burning Man.

Q: —different from other places. Burning Man, yes, yes.

Vázquez: Burning Man.

Q: [*Laughs*] But so, in that moment when you decided to leave, what was it like for you and was there a particular thing that happened that really showed you—

Vázquez: That I was leaving?

Q: —that you had to leave to be free?

Vázquez: Oh, no, no, no, no. I knew that.

Q: You just knew?

Vázquez: I knew that. Not only free. Cuba was too small. The way of thinking, the way of— because I've been in Puerto Rico, and I love it. I can live in Puerto Rico easily. I don't really like third-world countries because I grew up in one. And I loved—I'm a very sedentary person; I don't really like to travel that much. It's not my dream. I love San Francisco [California]. And I traveled, you know, of course. I used to give workshops all over the United States and I have traveled from here to—I don't know how to drive, but I have somebody drive me—driven from here to Miami.

Q: All the way?

Vázquez: All the way. And it's a wonderful trip.

Q: But you like being in your place. How did you get here? How did you get to San Francisco?

Vázquez: Okay, so I came to America, and I had my ups and downs. At the beginning, you try to discover where you're from, where you're going to—and I came from Cuba, I came to Key West [Florida], from Key West I went to Arkansas. I was there in a fort being processed by immigration and so on for a month and a half. And then from there, I went to Los Angeles [California]. So, Los Angeles was my city.

Q: This was in 1980, correct?

Vázquez: Nineteen eighty. July 2<sup>nd</sup> or something like that, 1980, I arrived to Los Angeles.

Q: With the departures from Cuba that happened in 1980. You're part of that wave.

Vázquez: In the Mariel floats [mass emigration of Cubans to the United States on the Mariel Boatlift] yes, yes, yes.

Q: Sí.

Vázquez: And I loved the fact that I left that way. It was an excitement, it was like conquer—you were like, oh, my God, I'm leaving Cuba, I'm leaving this motherfucker behind, you know what I mean? I have a lot of resentment with being in a communist country. I'm not a communist; I'm an anti-communist. I knew way before it went wrong that it was wrong. I mean, all you have to do is to read and go to school. This is not working. People are not happy, and you don't do—when somebody try to take your freedom away and you don't have the freedom to talk about who you are and be yourself or protest and scream and you have to obey, it doesn't go well with me. And it doesn't go well with anybody.

You have to be really stupid to allow—I mean, what happen in Cuba right now, every time when I go to bed—I'm not a very religious person, but I pray. I pray to whoever. Not necessarily to anybody specifically. Definitely not the Jesus that I learned in Catholic school. That's not the Jesus that I pray to, but I pray. And I always ask to the universe, to that energy that is amazing, to free Cuba. Because it's not right. It's sixty-three years of dictatorship and the whole world is

looking at it. And some people even find it interesting, which is really sad and scary. Interesting when people are fucking suffering.

Q: And so, you were then in Los Angeles.

Vázquez: Went to Los Angeles, stayed there until March '82, from 1980 to '82, and then I went to Dallas, Texas and met Nelson [*phonetic*]. I went to live in Nelson's apartment because I had my best friend in Cuba, from Camagüey city [Cuba].

Q: And perdón, Nelson is another Cuban refugee or immigrant who—

Vázquez: That came to—after 1980—

Q: —you became friends—and you live with him today. He's your housemate now.

Vázquez: Since 1982, we have been friends.

Q: Amazing.

Vázquez: We live together and we sleep—he had boyfriends and leave, but now it's like we are—through the pandemic, one more time I was like oh, my God, I'm so happy that I have Nelson in my life. Because you know, to be alone, for that time. So, we have each other, you know. He have family here and I have a family here—I have my sister here, she lives in Las

Vegas [Nevada]. She's a dyke. And she was here to visit me like a week or two ago. And she's cute. She only came here like five years ago from Cuba.

And it's an amazing—but I have learned how to live without a family. So, now what I have is a plus. It's beautiful that I can have that in my life. I'm in touch with them, but I'm on my own.

From a very young age, every time that I go to bed, nobody come and say goodnight and ask me if I had something to eat that day, how you doing. I have made it on my own all the way through.

Y para ser inmigrante y tener una vida decente—bien, he vivido muy bien. Yo he tenido todo lo que yo he querido.

Q: Qué bueno.

Vázquez: I don't know how to drive, so I don't want a car. And now, I regret not having a place.

I could've had it, I could've bought a place but it's like too much for me, the whole taxes and this and that and I'd rather be simple. I know that it's money, but I grew up without it and I was told—I grew up in a communist country, there's no such thing as money. So, I don't know how to manage it, I don't dream of being rich that way. This is not my dream.

Q: No?

Vázquez: No. I have had a lot of money in my life, and I worked it all, like a server—it's my money.

Q: If money, economic wealth is not the biggest dream for your life, what is the biggest dream?

Vázquez: Freedom. Freedom, to be free. I understand people that are homeless, I've met some people that are—no. Whatever you want to do with your life, it's your life, and that's the only thing you have that is yours. That's the only thing that I can show to people—this is my life. And that's all I have. So, why not I'm going to live it the way the fuck I want? It's my life. It's my life. Nobody has the right to control it. I know what is good and what is wrong. I went to school, I read, I'm aware, I'm not stupid. I know what is right and what is wrong. I respect people, I don't—I try not to lie. But if I have to, I do. You know what I'm saying? [*Laughs*] I live a decent life. I don't hurt anybody. And I help anybody that needs help. If I can help, I'm there to help. No questions asked. And that's my thing in life, you know what I mean?

Q: So, freedom is the biggest dream?

Vázquez: It's the only thing I crave in my life, and I had it. I had it. I'm free. I'm free. And I can say fuck it at any time, any day, and leave. And not leave. Or maybe just shut down, whatever. I'm here in this life to be free and I'm free. It's amazing that I can say that. And this is one of the many few times that I've said that, but it's true, I'm free. And I achieved what I came here for: freedom. And that's amazing.

I never wanted a yacht, I never wanted a two-floor house. Too much. I could've had it, but it's not my thing. And I still can, you know what I mean? I don't say never because it's like you never know what's going to happen. Tomorrow I can win the lottery. Every so often, I buy a

ticket. “Can I have a ticket?” Every once and a while. But maybe I can win. You know what I mean? Say that I have \$1 million, 3 million, 4 million, whatever, I won the lottery—it would not be to like—I would spend it, I would give some money to my community, the transgender community. Because we are marginated, we are—there are transgenders that have been deprived of their youth and their happiness because of religion and stuff like that. I conquered all that.

Q: So, speaking of transgender community, you came into contact with community in San Francisco—

Vázquez: In San Francisco. And for many years—

Q: —when you arrived here. And that was which year? Which year did you arrive in San Francisco?

Vázquez: '83.

Q: '83.

Vázquez: October '83, right before Halloween.

Q: And what was either the gay or trans community you encountered here like at the time?

Vázquez: I came here because my girlfriend had a girlfriend. And living in Dallas, I met a girl that I fell in love with, and she fell in love with me. And it was a very rocky relationship. We were very young. She was seventeen, I was twenty-three, I think, or twenty-two. And we were together for a long time. We came here together. She came here first. Well, she got pregnant, and she had a miscarriage. And then that soured the relationship. I went to Florida, and she came to San Francisco.

It was okay in Florida, but it was not like—too many Cubans. For real. That's the truth. I wanted something different—I already knew what was happening there. And she came here, and I was working at the Fontainebleau Hilton [Hotel] as a waiter and they called me up to the front desk and I was like, this is kind of ridiculous. So, I went there and she was on the phone and she told me, "I'm coming to see you tomorrow." And I left with her. And that's it. I came here with my girlfriend, that was roommates with Nelson. He have come here to—we arrived together in Texas as a group and then we came here. And so that's how I got to San Francisco.

And I immediately liked it. I remember taking acid the third day that I was here and I walked around and I was like, "Oh, yes. This is home." I got lost and everything. I loved it. I loved it. San Francisco ha—and I have beautiful friends here. I have lived here many years. I have been in the train here in San Francisco and people tell me—this person, this girl, one day come—I was in the—and she was like, "Oh, my God, I know you." And she's like, "Oh, I was in a party when I was really young." This is somebody that is like twenty-five, twenty-six and she come from, I don't know, from work. And she was like, "I met you and you were very high, and I was very high, and we were having a great time." [*Laughs*] And she tells me, "And everything you told me

that was going to happen in my life, it happens. Thank you.” She hugged me and kept on with her life. And those moments in life are irreplaceable and that’s what I want. What I want.

Q: What was the community like in the mid-‘80s and late-‘80s, the gay community here?

Vázquez: Do you know where I lived? I lived in the Tenderloin. At the very beginning, I lived in the Tenderloin. And then I moved to the Post [Street] area—I lived on Post and Larkin [Street] for many years. That’s another thing, I kept an apartment for many years, five, six, seven, ten, eleven years. I move around and it’s like I told you, I’m sedentary [*sic*]. Maybe because I left my country, maybe because—I don’t know. I get comfortable in a place and I’m very good with my hands, I can fix things. I put a wooden floor in my apartment before. I do things like that, I’m very handy. I call myself a handy tranny. And now, [*laughs*] I’m sixty-four years old, so my strength is somewhere there, but it’s not like it was before. But I can’t do things, I can’t do carpentry.

I learned it with my grandfather. They never taught me, but I was watching. And it’s like not a problem. Anything that I want to make, I put it in my hand, and I do it. Crossing. I can sew because my grandmother sewed, because my mom sewed. I can cook because my grandmother—this is the way we learned how to cook, she made sure that every one of us learned how to cook. She would be like busy doing whatever and she’d be like, “Are you checking the rice to see if it’s okay?” Or “Can you put some of this to the beans?” or like, “I’m making a cake. Can you put together this, this, and that and then show me—” and that’s how you help you make a cake. That’s the way it was, like that. She didn’t take the time to say, “I’m

teaching you—” she would do it very naturally because that’s what she was, she was a teacher, too.

Q: And how did you make your way to drag?

Vázquez: To drag?

Q: Drag.

Vázquez: The first time that I did drag, it was in the ’70s. Carnival was coming in Cuba—let me think to remember the year. Probably like ’75, ’74. And there was this guy that lived by himself in Cuba; he was very queeny. And so, I gathered my—the first hair that I wear—I had a mullet. It was the fashion then. It was a queeny, very short, long hair in the back, and then I’m like, “What am I going to do with my hair?” So, I remember there was this truck that was parked and, in each mirror, and each door they had the end of the tail of a bull. You know, it’s like a ponytail. So, I ripped it from the—put it in the pressure cooker, took the skin out [makes sound], put it in the sun. And in a couple of days it was dry, whatever, and it got very soft because I put it in the pressure cooker, and I put some rollers to it, and it was beautiful. That was my favorite ponytail.

And that was like ’74 and I borrowed clothes from like my friends and I think I stole some of my mom’s pantyhose or something like that. Yes, I took my mom’s pantyhose, which was the problem in Cuba because at the time, with the [Cuban] Revolution, there was nothing in the stores. And so, whatever you can gather, you save it and—it was awful. I would take my mom’s

stuff and make my own makeup with the coloring pencils and cold cream or stuff like that, when you mix it and then you make [*unclear*]. It was just like crazy.

Q: Wow. And you performed in Cuba, drag?

Vázquez: No, no, no, no.

Q: Or you just wore these things, just dressed?

Vázquez: Performing—no, there was no place to perform, it was against the law.

Q: No? It was against the law.

Vázquez: It was against the law being gay pretty much.

Q: Which is part of why you left, right?

Vázquez: Exactly. And the problem—the reason that I never really went to jail is because I went to school, so I had a job. Because I was a minor and as a minor, you can get away with a lot of stuff. And they just said, “Go home!” And they told me three or four times in Cuba, but I never been the person that attract police or—I would stay away from all that, you know what I mean?

Q: So, you kept pretty safe, but you also knew it was unsafe because it was against the law?

Vázquez: Oh, I did. Exactly. I tried not to break the law, but when you live in Cuba and you don't travel anywhere else and you don't know where else is, you grow up living there. And you are proud of many things, you are—Cuba have gone backwards two centuries. People travel in horses. It's like really, really sad. People have no medicine, people are drinking herbs and stuff like that. Santería [religion] is the main way of—Santería, I mean, it's like, what the fuck? This is African, from slavery. I mean, at least have the decency to have your own religion or like develop some other ways. It's like, this is really—my respect to God but I'm not a Santera. It's like coconut and shells are not going to solve the problem. I know that in my heart. No matter how much faith you have. Faith's a little bit overrated and it's way out of fashion. Do you know what I'm saying? *[laughs]* Hello.

Q: So then, when you were living in San Francisco, how did you make your way to drag performance?

Vázquez: I became Miss Gay Latina, 1992.

Q: In 1992. How did you become Miss Gay Latina? How did that happen?

Vázquez: Okay, in '89, I had to go back to L.A. [Los Angeles] for a minute because I was really too much into drugs. And I done heroin two or three times and I really didn't want to go that way. So, I moved to L.A. And I had been a bad girl, you know, the drug years it was like really heavy. Who cares? It was fun. I was a hairdresser; I had a lot of money, and it happened. So

anyway, I moved to L.A. with a friend, I lived there for like—and being there, I had a job and stuff. But in L.A., you have to have a car, which I didn't have. And L.A., those different minds. I was there momentarily; I knew that I was going to come back here, I didn't know when.

But there, I met other friends that came with me in 1980, but this is like twenty years later. Maybe not quite twenty years, like ten years later. These people were girls, and they were turning tricks and making money and I'm like, "Why not me?" And I started to do that. I dressed up to prostitute. I wasn't a good prostitute. Never been. Because I'm too intense, I think too much. And I'm not really comfortable with being an object, you know what I mean? It's okay to be cute, it's okay to have tits and ass and all that shit, but it's like—and I don't want to be a person that walks along in uniform because to me, those prostitute that are always prostitutes, they walk around with a uniform, a bitch uniform all day long. I'm not that person. I like me, I like to have me-time and I share myself plenty. But the certain part of exploitation that I can't really take so much.

Q: So, it never quite fit for you—

Vázquez: No.

Q: —prostitution or sex work?

Vázquez: No, no, no, no. I was a prostitute for a very short time.

Q: It was a short time. But in that time, you also dressed and presented as female and that was—

Vázquez: No, no, when I worked at the—

Q: No?

Vázquez: No, in the daytime I was a boy with long hair, that type of weird person that you don't really—what is that person? But it's like, I was used to that. I remember, "Usted es la última?" You know what I mean?

Q: Sí, sí, sí, a little genderqueer feminine—

Vázquez: Exactly, but I didn't rea—

Q: —pero not—

Vázquez: —I didn't know none of that. And at the time, this oldest time, I was totally away fro—I didn't want to hear the word community. Community and communist was too close for me. I had to learn what was one and what was the other. I was a hairdresser, I didn't care. I'm going to be who I am, I don't want to care. But then the AIDS epidemic and many other things, I realized—going to see a friend that was in the hospital that was I think transgender had been treated like shit by homosexuals in the community and telling them, "Now you have to dress like a boy and you cannot really do this, that you're doing."

Q: Trans women had to present as male to get services?

Vázquez: Women that already had the big silicone whatever, big tits and stuff, that tone it down and become a boy so you can get your services.

Q: Otherwise they couldn't get services as AIDS patients?

Vázquez: No, I cannot tell you otherwise, but that was their idea. And I found that very wrong. Extremely wrong. Because if you now have a disease that God knows why you have it and you're dying, who is anybody to tell you you have to die this way? No, my dear. I'm going to be a bitch till the day I die, I'm going to do my nails, I'm going to do my hair, whatever the fuck I want to do. Don't tell me to dress like a boy.

Q: Do you have any examples of specific stories of people who were dying of AIDS that you experienced, friends—?

Vázquez: That this happened? Yes, I do.

Q: How AIDS impacted your life personally.

Vázquez: Oh. I discovered that I suffered from PTSD because of work. Working with—the transgender community is a beautiful place to be, it's an amazing, attractive, obscure,

mysterious, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, so on and so on and so on and so on, but it's very cruel and it's very real. And working for the transgender community takes certain allure and certain cojones because it's the never-ending story. Problem after problem after problem after problem after problem. Becoming transgender have many different meaningful different people. Like anything else, you know?

And there are very beautiful transgenders, they have very beautiful hearts, and there are people that are very humble, but they can be cruel, and they can be wrong. Like any other person. And be willing to do things that are like [*exhales*]*—transgenders of color, for example, going to jail is a plus which I don't understand because freedom. How can you sacrifice your freedom? But they find that like part of a schooling, this is schooling of life. The whole abuse, being abused and abusing, all that from part of the community and it's like—you know, I know it. I was there.*

I'm in the process right now, I'm about to make a decision of having a sex change. Not because I wanted to sha—that part of myself is not something that I want to share. I don't want to sleep around anymore, it's not for that. It's not sexual. This time, it's not for sex; it's for me.

Q: A surgery that you're considering?

Vázquez: Yes. And they already approved me. I can really go and make a phone call. Actually, I talk to my therapist on Tuesday—I go once a week to therapy—and we're going to talk about it. Because for a minute there I was like, yes, I'm going to have it but right now lately I'm like very healthy and I might be a unicorn. You know what I'm saying? [*Laughs*] I'm very healthy, and

never been operated on. I'm sixty-four years old, I've never been in the hospital overnight. So, I have a really good health. What will this imply for me, how am I going to—? And that's an excuse. Really, it's like, I'm insecure at the moment about the surgery. So, I have to really, really pay attention to what's going to happen.

Q: It sounds like you're in a place of reflection about whether it's a path you want to take.

Vázquez: Very much, very much. And one more time, I'm put up on one of those—I put myself in a position of making a decision for life. I do want to have a pussy. That's no question about it.

Q: Are you comfortable saying what it would mean for you?

Vázquez: It would mean completion. Completion, you know? I'm not a perfect woman, I never will—I'm a great transgender woman. And do I need a pussy? I don't need it. Do I want it? Yes, I do. I'm afraid, yes. I'm afraid. And I said the first time that I made this publicly, I said—it's a big decision. I have other friends that are very successful, that are happy and all that. Like I said, it's not sexual and it's not that I'm going to go, oh, I'm going to fuck my pussy. None of that. None of that. It's just a matter—the day that I die—tomorrow, the next day, in the operation, whatever—whenever I die, I want to have a pussy. When I get there, God is going to be confused. “Oh, wait a minute. She has a pussy.” You know what I mean? That type of thing. *[Laughs]* Yes. I think it would complete me. For my own pleasure. Because it's different because my dick don't work anymore because I'm too old and I want to have a pussy. For that reason alone. You know, it's my pussy.

Q: It would be for you. Your pussy would be for you.

Vázquez: For me. For me. That's it. [Dogs enter] Hey, perrita! ¡Perrita, mira esto!

Q: Here come the dogs.

Vázquez: They always come to say hello.

Q: Hola, perritos.

Vázquez: So, yes, that's it. That means a lot for me. And it's an important decision. Many people think I have a sex change anyway. I don't talk about it with people that I don't want to fuck with because why should I talk to anybody about my genitals if we're not going to have sex? [*Talks to dogs*]. I don't talk about it, I'm discreet about it and I'm very conservative when it comes to that part of me.

I've been asked when I was doing my nails once. I always did my nails for when I was working in an office presence, nails done, all that. I'm old school that way. And I was doing my nails and this Salvadorian or Nicaraguan lady was there and she started saying things like, "You guys are so cute." And I know where she was coming from, of course, so I was like, I'm going to have fun with this. And after a while, she said only stupid things. She's like, "Are you complete?"

Meaning like if I—I’m like, “Oh, sure, yes, I have everything that I need—I have a pair of hands and I have a pair of arms”—

Q: [*Laughs*]

Vázquez: —and I was like, “I’m pretty complete.” She was like, “No, no, no. Down there.” And I’m like, “Oh, yes.” And she’s like, “Can I see it?” And I’m like, “Would you show me yours? I’ll show you mine.” Because I don’t see people that are like showing their genitals to each other just because. People are completely—especially Latina women that are really insensitive to when it comes to saying things to you that it’s like, [*exhales*] why am I going to—? But you know, I always have an answer because if you have the face and the balls to tell me things like that, I’m going to have the same one back, and I’m going to tell you whatever you deserve to be heard. This is none of your business, whatever, whatever. It’s like, what the fuck, you know? But it’s that people feel that they have the right to tell you whatever. So, yes, okay. Next question.

Q: One of the experiences, yes. Thank you. Yes, thank you for being willing to share so much.

Vázquez: Oh, I’m an open book, my dear. I realized a long time ago that keeping secrets doesn’t really work. Secrets are only fun when you share them. [*Laughter*] I mean, there are certain things that you don’t talk about, and you just don’t. But my life is open.

Q: But I think that some of the things that you have chosen to generously share, it will mean so much to people when they hear it.

Vázquez: One thing that my grandfather told me—

Q: Future generations.

Vázquez: —life is like a pie. Life and problems are like a pie. You know, like an apple pie. If you don't share it, the more that you have to eat from this pie. So, you don't want to deal with all that, you want to share your pie.

Q: Share the pie.

Vázquez: Share the pie. And I share my pie.

Q: Slices for younger generations, slices for future generations.

Vázquez: And I love the fact that my life, anybody that hears this, anybody that reads the books about me, anybody that knows me because I'm continuously—I take people under my wings and I talk about my life, continuously. I always bring these situations and talk about it. Because the friends that I have in life are learning from all this, from my trajectory around life.

Q: So, we've been talking about so many things—

Vázquez: Yes, I know, I know.

Q: —this part of this bottom surgery and all these many, many, many rich things, it's wonderful.

Could you tell us when in your life you started living openly as a woman?

Vázquez: In 1994.

Q: So, two years after winning Miss Gay Latina?

Vázquez: After Miss Gay Latina, I started to work in the communi—well, no. The day that I started working for the community. That was—when I des—

Q: That's when you started. So, maybe we could talk about the—

Vázquez: Proyecto Contra SIDA Por Vida, which was the project that I started working with and how beautiful that project was.

Q: Which was an absolutely historic—Proyecto Contra SIDA Por Vida is very historic—

Vázquez: Very.

Q: —Latino, gay right and AIDS organization.

Vázquez: But it was an AIDS prevention agency, and we prevent AIDS through art.

Q: Incredible. So, maybe we could sta—

Vázquez: It's incredible—

Q: It's incredible. [*Laughs*]

Vázquez: —because it was an amazing concept and the peo—I'm still in touch with the people that thought about these things and stuff like that.

Q: So, if we could, let's talk about Miss Gay Latina, how you won, what it was like. And then from there, you were invited in to working as an activist.

Vázquez: So, I came from L.A. back to San Francisco. It came to a point that it was like that life in L.A., it was just the wrong life—prostitution, it wasn't me. A lot of things was going on. And what filled the cup was I had to move from my place because this guy wanted to pimp me. To me, that concept—as much experience that I have in life and all that, I'm still kind of new to all this transgender thing and I was like this is ridiculous, I don't want this. This is before internet. It was just through the phone, and I was like—it was a very confusing thing. And L.A. as a culture of all this that I don't understand, that I don't like and I know that it happens. And I address it, I addressed it differently when I then later start—

So, I come from L.A., and I start my hairdressing thing. And then at the Latino hair salon, Victor's, I got somebody that come there and said, "Hey, you know, I work for this place that is called Instituto Familiar de la Raza and every year we have a contest para Esta Noche." And every time that I went out after I moved out from L.A. back here, I would go out in drag, like as a woman. At night, I was a girl. So, I had all these beautiful night clothes and sexy, beautiful dresses at night. I had long, black hair, my own hair, to my waist. I was that person.

Q: Could you tell me how it felt in your body or how you felt when you would walk out like that? How did you feel?

Vázquez: Well, the first few times that I walked around the streets in drag as a woman, I was terrified. Oh, my God. The first time that I prostituted as a woman, I was terrified. The first time for everything. But the thrill that I got through that, it pushed me on. I have no breast implants; these are my tits that I grew up from scratch with hormones. It's like this. And I'm a size 44DD, which I'm totally proud of. A little bit too big for what I wanted, but they're there, you know.

Q: When did you start the hormones?

Vázquez: In '92.

Q: In '92?

Vázquez: '92 , yes, '92. They asked me to participate in this contest and I was like, okay. I haven't done no drag shows till then; I was just a girl at night. And it was fun, it was a lot of fun. And I always want to wear women's clothes to go out. It's like so much varieties and it's not just a shirt and a pant, it's like you can wear dresses, you can wear combinations, you can wear nothing, you can wear whatever. And it's like I'm still very young, you know what I mean? I feel very young. I say that, [*laughs*] it's like, mentally I'm still there.

And I'm discovering—okay, I was not very successful as a gay man. Never been really a gay man. Kind of weird for me, you know, it's like, yes, but I was really weird looking, and I was into goth for a while and I was trying to break the traditional man look and it was not me. So, this was another way. And at this point, I wasn't really thinking of tits or anything like that, I was just having fun and I looked very convincing. The body, the hair, the allure, the glitter, whatever, the lentejuelas, the canutillo, todo eso participaba. The designers, todas estas cosas. Entonces, yo aprendo a vivir así, así salía. Y cuando se me viene la oportunidad de Miss Gay Latina, por supuesto. Me retiré. Me invitaron y gané.

Q: ¿Y esto fue en el bar de Esta Noche?

Vázquez: Esta Noche.

Q: El bar de la—

Vázquez: Beautiful bar.

Q: —del distrito de La Misión [San Francisco].

Vázquez: De La Misión. El único bar gay latino que había por muchos años. Y no solamente era un—eso era un anthem. Era una cosa. Pero ahí se resolvían muchos problemas de la comunidad. Si eras una persona de la comunidad latina gay, y llegabas hasta San Francisco y vas allí, ahí puedes montar un roommate, puedes montar trabajo, puedes montarte un marido, puedes encontrar cualquier cosa. Pero ahí comenzaba. ¿Cuántas amistades tengo yo que vienen de ahí?

Q: ¿Cuántos?

Vázquez: Muchas.

Q: Muchas amistades.

Vázquez: Muchas personas que conozco de ahí. Bueno, no hay muchas vivas porque cuando hablo de las personas de mi juventud, hay muchas muertas. Que se han ido, o personas que ya crecieron viejos, que sean viejos, que se fueron de la ciudad, ya no quedan muchas.

Q: Sí, las cosas han cambiado. Pero hubieron muchas conexiones de ese lugar. Ese lugar era como un lugar comunitario porque ayudamos a encontrar algo.

Vázquez: Tú llegas a mí por Tina, Valentina [*phonetic*].

Q: Sí.

Vázquez: Y Tina, yo la conozco de Esta Noche.

Q: De Esta Noche.

Vázquez: Y después, cuando yo trabajaba para el Proyecto Contra SIDA, yo entré trabajando como transgender. The first time the Proyecto Contra SIDA, the first time living as a woman. And the way that I did that is going back to train a un instituto que había aquí que igualaba a—un college para hacer outreach.

Q: Así que, ¿Esta Noche fue un lugar de refugio para usted?

Vázquez: No necesariamente. Yo fui allí buscando fun.

Q: No, refugio, no. Divertimento.

Vázquez: Looking for dicks. And I found a set of social problems and issues that I got involved with without even knowing it. And then all of a sudden, I'm representing this community.

Q: How did it feel when you won Miss Gay Latina?

Vázquez: It felt great. It felt great. I was parading in Gay Pride [Parade] in a Cadillac. And I also knew the responsibility that came with being a Miss. It always does. [*Talks to dog*].

Q: What's the responsibility?

Vázquez: Well, you know, when you're a Miss, you represent your community, you go to places to do volunteer work, you go to shows here and there. And that's how it started. And then the idea of doing shows came and how, as a Miss, can I address my own issues of the co—so, what am I going to do? I said, I'm going to go do shows. I went and talked to the guy in Esta Noche, the owner, and I said, "Listen, I want you to let me have a show here." Because they have a license to open Saturdays until four o'clock in the morning. So, I said, "If you let me do a show at 1:45"—it start at 1:45. People have half an hour to have drinks—you know, because they're stretched out like fifteen minutes—people have half an hour to get drinks, I can fill the bar up and you have nobody here at two o'clock in the morning.

They give it to me, I keep the door, you keep the bar. And he agreed to that. He was very happy about it because he was making tons of money, people would come to see me because I've been around, I have a bunch of friends different that I will go to parties, [with] that are queens too. And people love me. This time when I come, the AIDS epidemic, there was not like a Latina queen that was out there. And that was me. I filled all those blanks. And people were loving it. You know what I mean? People would come to see me perform. And I was a good performer.

Q: What were some of the songs you'd perform?

Vázquez: I'd perform like—I liked '80s in those times so I did a lot of Eclipse Total del Amor, Annia Linares, cubanas que nadie conocía aquí. Hacía Amanda Miguel, esas canciones de los 80. Pero tenía mis canciones; hacía La Lupe. Pero no en carácter; yo solamente pedía prestada la voz a estas artistas y yo tenía mi propio estilo, which was my exit. It was my way to do things. Because to imitate, you have to go for the look. And so, I always made sure that people were—I'm going to have this number, but I'm not going to do it like that person.

Q: And so, how did the Miss Gay Latina role that you stepped into lead into getting involved in Proyecto Contra SIDA Por Vida?

Vázquez: I worked on Proyecto Contra SIDA Por Vida for many years, until 2002, I think—2000, 2000. I got laid off and I was like, okay. So, I took—I was ready to—I worked in almost every agency in town. After Proyecto Contra SIDA Por Vida, I was the transgender coordinator for TARC, Tenderloin AIDS Research Center. It's another agency that was in the middle of the Tenderloin.

Q: Before you started working at Proyecto Contra SIDA Por Vida, you were a hair stylist?

Vázquez: A hairdresser, yes, at Victor's. Working under the table for ten or eleven years, I wasn't declaring anything. I was making a lot of money, tax-free, blah, blah, blah.

Q: Under the table and that's how you survived.

Vázquez: I survived it that way. And I didn't plan it to be that way, but it was a very Latino way. In that place that I worked for so many years and I made so many close connections with people, they didn't even know my last name, they didn't know my social security. I had my clients, they loved me, I had a lot of clients, I made good money. I made like six, seven hundred dollars a week. For that time, it was perfect. And when my clients saw me doing outreach in the street, they stopped the car and said to me, "What are you doing working the streets?" I said, "I'm not working the street, I'm just doing outreach." [*Laughter*].

Q: So, talk about the work you were doing for Proyecto—

Vázquez: I thought it was beautiful. I came in the time when AIDS was still very much alive. I mean, they already had prophylaxis and there was the AIDS test and all that, but people were dropping, in the transgender community specifically. And I made sure that when I started working there, I was a transgender and I wanted to serve the transgender community. And any job that I will have will be related. I wanted to be related, I wanted to be oriented to the transgender community because I knew in my heart that they needed it.

Q: And when you took that job at Proyecto Contra SIDA Por Vida, you also started living openly as transgender and as a woman?

Vázquez: I give all my boy clothes away, and I become a woman. It happened that I had a boyfriend. All that happened at the same time, I had a boyfriend. Life was beautiful.

Q: How did it feel for you to give away the boy clothes? How did you feel?

Vázquez: That felt weird, but it felt good. It felt good because the decisions that you make in life, like right now that I'm going to make this decision, I really get into it. If I'm going to do something, I don't want to do it mediocre, I wanted to do it—and at the time I needed—and a lot of girls looked at me at the time. A lot of young, queer, Latino—these new girls that were coming up that looked at me and they wanted to be me in a way. They wanted to have a boyfriend, to have a job. It was inviting and it was a way for them to know if you're a fresh immigrant in this country and you see that, then you know that you can do it, that you can be a transgender, that you can have a job like the one I have. So, I was a pillar for the community. Las personas estaban mirando and I loved it.

Q: A pillar.

Vázquez: A pillar for the community. I was just like totally—it was happening, the newspapers and I was interviewed, and I traveled. On my bus was Diane Felix, which is like a dyke, and I love her, I love her. Jesse Johnson was the person that opened up Proyecto, but Diane was involved from the very beginning. And Diane taught me how to be a woman in many ways. That dyke, that beautiful, beautiful person taught me how to be a woman. She taught me about pride. And she's been an activist since the very first days, in the early '74 detention for the gay community. I'm a grassroots activist; I didn't take a class to become this, it's something that I felt. And I came to save the world. I want to save the community and I'm going to give it all I

got. Of course, then you get there, and a lot of things are different, and you have to think about it because it's going to be hard.

Q: Can you give us some examples—

Vázquez: Examples of what it's like—?

Q: —of the work you did with Proyecto?

Vázquez: Okay. At the beginning, when I came to Proyecto, when I first came to America and came to this program, it was called SOS [*phonetic*] and it was a program from the—let me see if I remember—the Haight Ashbury Free Clinic. And what they did is they would train a group of people that became outreach workers—men, women, transgenders and all that—and then they would send them to the different communities, and they sent me to Proyecto Contra SIDA, who needed transgender and needed an outreach worker. So, I came there and I'm working with all these other people, a lot of women, a lot of guys, a lot of gay men—everybody was queer there.

And it was like the first paychecks were coming out of the house of good men [*phonetic*]. And there were a lot of protests. They didn't want a transgender to be making money with their money. And my bosses, Diane Felix, Jesse Johnson, they had to fight because there was—even in Berkeley. It was not always down to Berkeley because you know Berkeley had like the Chicano group or whatever, and they were not happy about it. I came to work from the National Datho [*phonetic*] which was the only national men of color AIDS prevention agency at a national

level. And they had three different projects: one from the American Indians, one from the Latinos, and one from the Black people. And I came to work with them. They all have a transgender, and it was like a really empowering thing.

And I was working with Yvette Robla [*phonetic*], who was working at Tenderloin Resource Center at the time. And it was beautiful. It was a beautiful thing; I had a boyfriend, I was happy, I was excited. I had my ups and downs, but I learned it, I learned my craft. I remember I was not even close to learning computers, and I think my boss told me, Diane told me, “If you don’t learn computers, I don’t want to give you a raise.” So, I learned computers right away. During my own, I went—like, there’s some books. I remember Windows 95, I read a whole book on Windows 95 and I learned it and that’s how I started. Actually, I started with Apple and then moved to Windows and then became a computer nerd, like I told you. The first computer that I got, it was an old performer from work that they were going to throw it away and I said, “Let me have it.” And you will go to the segunda and buy parts of old computers and put them together, and that’s how I started.

Q: And you were the first trans Latina—

Vázquez: The first trans—

Q: —to be employed to address HIV issues in San Francisco?

Vázquez: To work on HIV prevention in San Francisco, yes.

Q: You were the first trans Latina?

Vázquez: Yvette and myself.

Q: Together.

Vázquez: Yvette Robla and myself. We both were in the same program for the HIV free clinic. We were paid from the same company, and she was placed in Tenderloin AIDS Research Center, and I was placed in Proyecto Contra SIDA.

Q: And what was it like to be the first, to be the trailblazer?

Vázquez: Well, it was a lot of [*makes sound*—I learned how to get a job as a transgender, it's not easy. To go for an interview with women's clothes and to be taken seriously and to the man's respect is not easy. It's not an easy thing and I give it to any transgender that goes to do that. It's not easy. I mean, never in my mind occurred to me that I was never going to get the job that I was interviewing for. That was number one. Number two: if I address you with respect, I expect respect back. When I talk about freedom, all this applies, you know what I mean? That respect, that recognition of being a human being that is here in front of me. They don't ask you who you are, they call you for your skills. And when you show up, a lot of people are not happy. But if you have the skills and I can prove to you that I can do this job, you have to give it to me. Because that's what the law is for and I'm not going to allow anyone to come and—not anymore.

Q: Could you talk about this group Las AtreDivas?

Vázquez: AtreDivas? So, I'm working at Proyecto now and I want to give to the community on my own. So, I form a group. I have this group that was like four transgenders. There were two drag queens and two transgenders, and we had a show every Saturday at 1:45 where the money that was collected, the dollars, I would give it to Proyecto Contra SIDA for the transgender community. And AtreDivas had a lot of legs, a lot of legs. Because we didn't know that—but we were cute, it was the four of us and we make sure that we have an opening and a closing in the show. It was like a real, real show, you know what I mean? And we have clothes that was dedicated to that, we found the money, we searched it, we do fundraisers, we support ourselves.

We represent Proyecto, we represent the community, the transgender Latino community, gay pride and here and there and we were present in the community at the time. Nobody had that before. So, we were pioneers in that. We had a group of transgenders that were out there in front of everybody being who we are. And giving the message away. And it was the message of prevention: put a condom on the dick and using it if you want to do drugs. We boiled it down. I mean, there was a lot of things that were happening at the time and a lot of different ideas and people were not clear.

And the other part of that is that we were addressing the community in Spanish. Because all the programs and every—still is—are designed in English. There was another person, Luz Guerra [*phonetic*], from Austin, and she wrote this program that is called Cultura es Vida [*phonetic*].

And Cultura es Vida was a new way to bring your message to the community in Spanish for the Latinos.

Q: And also, ¿me imagino que dar el mensaje en español también era que culturalmente se sentía como algo latino?

Vázquez: Pues sí, era de nosotros, era—we thought about it, we put it together.

Q: Es otro tono, es otro sabor, es otra onda, ¿o no?

Vázquez: Y hay muchas personas que—tú sabes, hay muchas maneras de ser latino que no son malas maneras, pero que son otras costumbres. Por ejemplo, una cosa que tuvimos que address, tú sabes que cuando estás en tu país, qué se yo, tienes un catarro y te mandan unas pastillas, una penicilina, pues para todo mandaban penicilina [*laughter*] y te curan. Pero que ya se te cura y dejas de tomar las medicinas.

Eso mismo ha pasado con la gente, decía, no puedes dejar de tomarla. Aunque te sientas muy bien, sabes, decir, “Yo no voy a tomar esto ya me cansé.” Yo me agarro haciendo eso todavía con mis tratamientos, que me mandan unas pastillas para el corazón, y a veces, “Ah, me siento bien,” y no me las tomo porque es algo cultural. Entonces, para HIV no puedes hacer eso porque te mueres. Entonces, para crear esa costumbre nos costó mucho trabajo. Yo estuve en el primer—

Q: Hay que reconocer el contexto cultural para poder enseñar de una forma apropiada.

Vázquez: Trabajando como coordinador en TARC [Tenderloin AIDS Research Center], fue fantástico. This is in 2002, I think I start to do that. So, trabajando allí en 2002 de coordinadora, me empiezo a dar cuenta que a las chicas les están mandando golpes los maridos. Pero si son delincuentes, te matan, han matado a personas, han cortado caras y why are you being hit? Well, because I start to do my own research. And slyly and politely, pone esa pregunta—ya no era solamente latina, ahí estaba coordinando un transgender—cogenders because there were female-to-male and male-to-female and all types of races.

So, I start to—in my researches, in my give and take, I start to—I address domestic violence without calling it domestic violence, but I wanted to know the reason why the Latino transgenders that were being hit were being hit because their mothers were hit by their husbands. And they thought that the—they knew that it was not it, but it's like with that culture again, they were being hit by these motherfuckers that were like this tall. Why are you being abused? They didn't know why because this is what happened at home. So, you're coming from an abusive home, more likely you're going to repeat that in your own life. And I discovered then that most of women were mothers being slapped around and I'm going to take it. I had to do a lot of work with that.

And always been very lucky because—either been very lucky or been very persistent—that my bosses would allow me to go that extra mile. They would allow me to say “Okay, you can research that part.” I mean, it wasn't in the contract because—that's another thing that happened

when I first started to work, there was no contracts. They give you the money and then you develop your own manner of working, way of working, blah, blah, blah, blah. But then after certain people—it was a lot of money among the people that was managing all these things. I remember the National Task Force, the CEOs. There was a Black couple that left with 27 million [dollars] and went to Brazil. They can never come back into United States, but 27 million from the AIDS community and they bought a house, and they live large with that money. Awful, awful thing.

So, at a certain point—when that happened, we had no funding. And I worked for like two weeks without pay; I get it back. And a lot of people left because they wanted to get paid. It really took a lot of Diane and it took a lot of us. Terrible, terrible thing happened. There was a lot of money for AIDS at the beginning. There was an agency that had an open credit line, but after that, they went bankrupt and thing happening. And the Proyecto Contra SIDA is still going on, it's called El/La [*phonetic*] is Proyecto. So, there's something left.

Do you know Marcia? Marcia Ochoa? She's also a writer. She was part of—she was the CEO for El/La for a long time and then she passed along the torch to other people, new people that I don't even know who they are. And I'm not involved. I'm not involved anymore with the community. I try not to because I get too—I'm intense. And I wanted to be there. And the last thing I did, I worked for Instituto Familiar de la Raza, and I was a clinical case manager, and I was working with mental health, which I think is very important right now. And I did it until I couldn't no more.

Q: And one more question about—

Vázquez: Sí, go ahead.

Q:—Las AtreDivas. Can you talk about the name? Puede ser en español.

Vázquez: AtreDivas?

Q: Como que, el significado del nombre. Porque hay mucha riqueza.

Vázquez: Bueno, porque las cosas de vestirse de mujer y salir a trabajar en un stage, es un atrevimiento.

Q: Sí, es un atrevimiento.

Vázquez: Y no sabes cómo te lo van a recibir. Y no queríamos llamarnos atrevidas porque era como too cursi, atrevidas, pero AtreDivas es—nada más que cambiar las sílabas. Y es una maravilla.

Q: ¿Lo inventó usted el nombre? Porque es genial.

Vázquez: No, el nombre lo inventó Héctor León, que era una persona que se vestía—que era un drag queen y que es de Berkeley. I don't know what he's doing right now or anything. He got

burnt right away, alienated. But it was his idea and then I just supported and I developed it. He made it a group. He had a persona that would go out in the streets in drag. Se llamaba La Condonera, y que la personas lo conocían y todo a repartir condones [*makes sound*]. But he was using our fundings—he was not stealing, but he was stretching it to places that are not supposed to be. And it came to a point that after all this happened—I think it was '95 or '96 when this start to happen—the government is not stupid and they are going to see a certain point that the people are misusing their money. A lot of this money was grants, but a lot of money was donations.

Q: ¿Y cuándo se puso usted el nombre Adela? Hablando de nombres.

Vázquez: Adela me—bueno. En Los Ángeles—

Q: ¿En Los Ángeles?

Vázquez: —cuando yo comencé a—yo quería un nombre que dijera que yo era latina. Y yo acababa de ver una película que se llama *Like Water for Chocolate*. Y yo aprendí de las Adelitas. Que hasta ese momento, yo no sabía que existían Las Adelitas; yo no soy mexicana, no es parte de mi cultura, pero you know. And I loved that idea, Adelitas.

Q: Can you explain what Adelitas is?

Vázquez: Adelitas is these women that went to the war with Pancho Villa, and they were there to fuck, to cook, to fight, they were part of the moveme—of the group of people that were fighting

with Pancho Villa. He brought a big group with him. And Adelitas are the reason of many things. Adelitas are like the first Chicanas, the first—like women that you see in the taquerías with the black hair and the flowers in their hair, that's an Adelita.

Q: So, from there you got the inspiration for your name?

Vázquez: For my name. And I say, well, Adela is perfect because Adela, it makes me a significant woman in the history of Latina women. I'm an Adelita, I'm there—because that's my intention, to be a woman, to serve. Not to serve in a way of like, "Monday—". No, no. I mean, like if you need me, if there's something happening and my efforts are going to—I want to be there.

Q: What have you learned about womanhood?

Vázquez: Oh, my God.

Q: As a sixty-four-year-old woman, what have you learned about womanhood?

Vázquez: I have learned a lot, I learned a lot. I learned about respect, I learned about a place in the conversation, I learned how women are being shut. When there's a meeting and a woman is talking and then a guy comes out and talk and it's louder. I learned how to push the society, I learned about humiliation. I learned about all that, and being humble. But humble and humiliation, even though they derivate—una sale de la otra, it's total—humble means a lot.

Being a male before, being humble is far away from the male reality. Yo soy el que manda, el macho que se—pero humbleness is a beautiful quality in anybody. And so, being humble as a woman is fantastic but not stupid. And I make sure that when I became a woman, I told myself this very in the game, I do not want to be abused, I do not want to be mistreated, and if the time comes to hit somebody, I'm going to wonder when I'm going to hit faster and harder, bang. No. I'm not going to allow that. We might fight, but I don't want to be oppressed that way.

Q: And what have you learned about how men treated and how women are treated in this world?

Vázquez: I think it all comes from the church, the Catholic church, and it came from families and it's something that we don't talk about, but it's church. The church teach women, in the Latino community, to be Marías. Las Marías, there are las María Anas. Las María Anas, a partir del pelo largo, [unclear] con niños en los brazos, y haciendo lo que el hombre te diga. Eso para mí es un dolor. Yo veo a las latinas que llegan a este—las personas de Latinoamérica, las mujeres, la gran mayoría de las mujeres de Latinoamérica viviendo de esa manera y me hace sentir horriblemente mal.

Porque dentro de esa cultura, del macho y de Las María Anas y todas estas mierdas, hay una gran grupo de personas que es afectado por esto: los hijos, las personas mayores, esas personas tan vulnerables. We don't value our old people, Latinos don't value old people like they're supposed to be valued. We have the key of the future. Old people have the key to the future and if you don't value your old people—and we don't; Latinos make fun of old people, Latinos—and it's so refreshing to talk to old people and you learn so much if you just listen. And they have a

wonderful life and they have beautiful, beautiful way to address things. And they already learned the crap.

Q: Entonces, ¿qué significa ser una mujer libre?

Vázquez: Oh, libre. Significa que you are going to do with your life whatever the fuck you want. Significa that you don't have to explain yourself for anything. You do because you feel. Of course, that doesn't give me—no es libertinaje, es libre. Libre de alma, de expresión, de espíritu. Libre. Libre means that you understand what is good and what is bad, that you look at religion, you look at social movements, you look at everything at once. It's not just I'm going to do this because I'm libre. And I've behaved like that sometimes, but it's not what it is.

Being a woman that is free means respect, means dedications, means—no sacrifice. I'm not talking about sacrifice because when people tell me they are sacrificing, I get scared, and I don't want to get out. I don't like nice people. When somebody tell me—when you have me somebody that is just nice, oh, fuck off. That's kind of creepy, you know what I'm saying? *[Laughs]* I don't like a nice —just nice, no. Like nice with a certain skew, but nice. Like when you talk to somebody's boyfriend, oh, somebody's boyfriend, “Oh, he's so nice.” And then you think about it and the only thing you can say about this person is they're nice. Well, I don't want that. I don't want to be that nice, I don't want that nice people. No. I don't want it around; it's creepy.

Q: Can you tell us about how chosen family has been in your life? Familia de corazón, the family that you've woven, queer family?

Vázquez: Yes, queer family. It's a queer family.

Q: You use the language queer family?

Vázquez: I like queer. I like the word queer. I don't really like the word gay that much. I like the word the faggot, those words because they are picante, because they're not nice. Nice to me is just like the wrong part of the thing, of the majority of things. I like spicy things, I like to cause a little pro—if I say faggot, people think about it. I be respectful—and I understand about politically correct right now, it's all about politically correct. And it's like you have to—if you are in Rome [Italy] you do like Romans do, so I have to be politically correct, but I am not really. At heart, I am not. I like to be a rebel, to provoke.

Q: To rebel and to provoke. And so, in that context, queer, you like queer—

Vázquez: I like queer.

Q: —and even faggot. More than gay. Dyke. That language.

Vázquez: Dyke is kind of cute. I like it better than lesbian. Lesbian is fine, I have respect for lesbians.

Q: Cada quien con su lenguaje, pero usted aprecia ese idioma.

Vázquez: Ese idioma, sí.

Q: Sí. Entonces, hablando de queer family, the family, can you tell us some examples of how you have made family, had children?

Vázquez: Well, it's like the whole children thing came without me knowing that I was going to be a mother, really.

Q: How did you become a mother?

Vázquez: Somebody told me, "You're my mom."

Q: When was that?

Vázquez: A long time ago. In AtreDivas, there was a person from AtreDivas who was called Alejandra—still alive and beautiful.

Q: In the early '90s or?

Vázquez: This is in like early '90s. And Alejandra was eighteen years old when I met her and she was a fresh drag queen, fresh transgender, very cute, Puerto Rican. But I loved her, she was so cute. So, I took her under my wing, and she was my daughter. And that's my first daughter.

And I had then another one, and another one, and before I know it I have a lot of them that I didn't want to be a mother to them, but how can I deny that?

Q: So, if they came to you, then you would take them under your wing?

Vázquez: I would take a consideration and then when Julián [Delgado Lopera] came around, I—  
[laughs] oh, my God. I met Julián—you know Juana María?

Q: Rodríguez?

Vázquez: Sí.

Q: Mm-hmm, sí la conozco, sí.

Vázquez: Juana María es mi amiga and I have collaborated with her and stuff.

Q: Juana María Rodríguez, the scholar.

Vázquez: Sí. She [is] totally like my friend. And we collaborated in many things, she writes a book—I'm in her books, too.

Q: Her book, *Queer Latinidad*?

Vázquez: Sí. And then there are putas in it and todas estas cosas.

Q: Sí, *Putá Life* [*Seeing Latinas, Working Sex*].

Vázquez: Sí, yo he estado en eso. Y I used to present in her classes. I just talk about myself, and then I open it up for the classroom. And Julián was in this class. So, I pass my card around. When Julián graduated from [University of California] Berkeley, he called several people that he have and, “I’m looking for a job.” And I said, “Well, I cannot really offer you a job because in my position at work is I don’t work in human resources, but I know that there is work there for youth.” So, I give Julián—I opened the door to the community through Instituto Familiar de la Raza.

Q: And this is Julián Delgado Lopera who is now a writer?

Vázquez: He was always a writer, but he was already graduated from college. And he had wrote a lot of stuff; he had a blog. And I liked his way of writing, it’s very cute, it’s very fresh and it’s something—I have read a lot through life through Julián. Julián was the first queer person that I saw getting married with another woman when she was a woman. And to me, the whole concept of marriage—I mean, I respect it and I think it’s a great right that we have to be together with someone and celebrate love that way and have a couple.

I will never get married with—I’ve been married and divorced and all that through my life, but it’s not like—and I had a domestic partnership with my boyfriend. But that marriage, it’s kind of

weird because after winning that major war, we lost a lot—there was nothing really for a while there, there was nothing—not until [Donald] Trump, there was nothing to fight about. Then Trump came along, and everything went wrong and to fight again. But not until then, you know. For a minute there, there was nothing to fight about because people are getting married, this is what we've been wanting.

Q: So, you went to Julian's queer wedding, and he came to you and you became his mother?

Vázquez: It happened a little—Julián adopt me as a mother. I didn't adopt Julián as a daughter back then. And then it's like, he's so sweet, he's so cute, he's so—and I feel. Now, I'm friends with the real mother, you know that? She sent me presents for my birthday, she called me up, and it's like *María es una divina, la mamá de Julián*. Super beautiful person. And we're friends.

Q: So, you are friends with his biological mother?

Vázquez: Biological mother. And when I first met Julián, Julián then had a big issue with mom and with his family. So, I gave Julián this mother thing that he must crave and not until he got, married with Laura, then he called his mom and he said, "Well, I'm getting married to a woman," blah, blah, blah, "and if you don't come—" and my present to Julián as well was I cooked all the food for the wedding. All the food, which was an amazing amount of work, but I cooked all the food. And I'm glad. And I went with Nelson. It was a very cute wedding, a very beautiful wedding. And just like two or three years only, but it was cute. Julián has been—I

learned a lot about life through Julián. Julián is very smart and he's very stubborn. He's someone that not one direction, he knows.

Q: What have you learned from being a mother to these younger queers?

Vázquez: That you want to kick their asses and you really can't because [*laughs*] they've become an adult and you have to let them go. I have got to savor a little bit that part of life that is forbidden for me, in a way. Not really, but it's forbidden. We don't really—not until now people don't get married and have kids and all that stuff.

Q: Transgender people?

Vázquez: Transgender people. And not until HIV came along, transgenders were underground, completely underground. We were showgirls and prostitutes. That was it. And the two or three that were work, they had to pass, they had to be that people didn't know that they were transgender at work. That lie, that big lie. And I never really was part of that, really never like—I don't remember fucking anybody because I was drunk. I like to be myself. I like to make sure that people know who I am before I present myself and then I be.

Q: So, I'm hearing you say that being a parent is something that was off limits for gay people and even more so for transgender people.

Vázquez: No, for transgender people it was almost impossible.

Q: Until very recently.

Vázquez: I mean, hello. People think that—to this day, a lot of people confuse or mix pedophilia with being queer, which is so far away from the truth. And I think it's needed. I think it's needed to have a family. But then they become your family. And I don't really have a queer family in my chosen family, I have a lot of straight people in my chosen family. I have friends that I may have fucked them and they're still my friends and they're my family and we communicate all the time.

I have a couple of friends like Carol [*phonetic*] and I have Eva [*phonetic*] and these two girls I met in the early '80s and we grew up together. And we are very close. Eva is married and she lives in New Mexico, and she has a little kid that I love and he's like so sweet and I talk to Eva regularly. And then I have Carol, who is from here. Carol is a very interesting person; Carol comes from a very old family in San Francisco and the father—I can share my life and she shared hers with me—and I learned a bunch of stuff. And we have a great relationship.

Q: So, as a person who has a rich chosen family, what have you learned about what real family is?

Vázquez: It's a façade.

Q: But what really makes a family?

Vázquez: It's important. Family is very important at any level. You have to have a group of people that is your support emotionally and that knows you, that you can be yourself, that you don't have to lie. If you're a liar and they know that you're a liar and they're going to love you because you're a liar. That's important in anybody's life. It's important to be supported by a group of people that respect you for who—the things that you try to do, people that encourage you to be who you wanted to be. People that don't try to stop you.

Family is another word that is very overrated. Your family can make you or destroy you. And there are dysfunctional families that are rooted in dysfunction, and they destroy you. No doubt about it. They don't have an open mind and they don't want to have it. They decided that you are wrong, for whatever reason. And sometimes that happens for convenience—for money, stuff like that that whatever, the whole concept of—

Another church thing for me is the whole faith and you have to be this way in church and this morality and all that and it's like at the end of the day, church is a made-up story to save your soul, which I don't really give a fuck what's going to happen to my soul after I die. It's only this body and this life, I don't believe in reincarnation. I believe that this is your life. I believe in an energy that is bigger than you and that you are an energy. This is an energy of who are you and when you die, that energy becomes off and that's it.

Q: Así que, la vida hay que vivirla ahora.

Vázquez: Ahora. Mi abuelo decía que las preguntas grandes de la vida, vive tu vida, haz bien, no mires a quién, y al final de tu vida, se resuelven tus problemas. Tus respuestas están al final de tu vida. De la misma manera que tú haces una carrera deportiva y te dan un trofeo al final, la muerte es el trofeo de la vida.

Q: ¿Él decía?

Vázquez: Él decía, mi abuelo. Y para mí, yo crecí con personas viejas, pues ellos estaban preparandos para que yo, si en caso que se murieran, yo tuviera una solución, ¿entiende? Es lo que estaban haciendo. Pero it makes a lot of sense. At the end of your life, if things are the way they're supposed to be, like that, you get a prize. Death is the prize of life. And that's the way I look at it.

Q: And at this moment in your life, here at sixty-four on the journey, what surprises you most about your life right now?

Vázquez: That Trump is fucking coming out—

Q: [*Laughs*]

Vázquez: —and is going to try to get president again. That is freaking me out. [*Laughter*]

Q: That surprises you most. But what about in your personal life? Or maybe about society when you look at the world.

Adela: Well, my personal life is—well, it surprises me that I’m still alive, that I’m still healthy, that I’m having the conversation with you, that I understand life this way that allows me to be free. Because being free is not just like hey, I’m going to do whatever I want. No, you want to do whatever you want but you are going to apply. At a certain point, you have to apply with yourself, with others. And I’m very much a rebel but I have to apply myself to people to listen to me, to be respected and so on and so on.

Q: So, that you’re here is one of the things that surprises you about this moment?

Vázquez: Life, I’ve been very rich for me. I have had many experiences that I didn’t know that I was going to be able to have. I went to the turn of the century, I’ve seen two epidemics, I’ve seen computers, which is amazing. I’ve seen technology go big; I’ve seen people being wronged in many ways. And that is a privilege. When you see all these things happening, that’s a privilege. And a privilege to be able to sit down here and talk to you about it and have a decent conversation and have a fantastic time talking about things that can be so wrong in many ways.

I have gone through a lot of hard things, but with my way of being, laughing about my community and about my peers and my friends and stuff, things happen and I’m not the type of person—if something had to happen, I’m going to do it and then I think about it later. Because I

don't make big plans, I don't make a-year-from-now plan. I make very short plans, a month or something like that. I don't want to disappoint myself one more time.

I never met my father and that is a problem that I view in the file of, I don't want rejection. I don't want to be told that I'm wrong one more time. So, meeting my father could've been that. He's in America. I mean, he must be there by now. But he was in America when I came here in 1980, but I never met—this is a whole side of my family that I don't know. I don't think about it because I never had it. It's like being blind from when you are born. You go through life blind and you are fine because you were always blind. But that part of me, it was denied from birth and God knows why.

Q: What do you wish—

Vázquez: And I think—I am about to say that—

Q: No, por favor [please].

Vázquez: —that kids are mothers' kids. Father's kids are [*makes sound*]. Kids are mothers' kids. It's the mother who makes who you is. That's the mystery right there, this mom. Moms can be fantastic, moms can be a motherfucker, moms can be—you're going to love your mom regardless. And in the same way, I believe that the parents do their best with what they have all the time. So, I forgive my mom for who she was and I forgive every mother in the world that have done wrong to their kids because that's the way they were, that's the best way that they can

do. Maybe you don't have the experience, maybe you don't have what it takes at the time. And then life comes around and will teach you. She learned her lesson. I wanted to think about it. When you die, the children, she learned her lesson.

And there were many things that my mom did, even after I left Cuba, that I don't understand. She have a reason. And I cannot spend the rest of my life questioning that because I don't have the answer. And at a certain point, you have to learn that certain things don't have an answer. Maybe one day, maybe never. But I don't really know what. She was a very complex person with a lot of issues to herself that she never really shared. So, obviously she didn't learn the lessons that I have. I have the chance to leave Cuba, I had the chance to meet the world. My world. It's not really that big, but it's a wonderful world and I love it. I dream, I dream big. I don't dream little. My problems are not problems, they are tragedies. I have tragedies *[laughs]*. Problems, ah, that's nothing. I'd rather have a tragedy, I like a tragedy. I'm going to close that because it's fucking cold. Un momentito, amor.

Q: What do you wish that younger generations that trans people of color could understand or know about your generation?

Vázquez: That we opened the door. That we then were once young, and that we dream of the future, that some of us got and some of us never got to meet. There were a lot of transgenders that died along the way, that being yourself is best, that you don't have to lie. You don't have to pretend. You can be a beautiful transgender. Being a transgender you can empower yourself, you don't have to be—you are who you are. You can be a beautiful Latina transgender that came

from the middle of the fucking jungle, and you are beautiful. That beauty is not just skin; it comes from within. When you're beautiful inside, that's going to show. Don't lie to yourself. There's no need. There's always somebody that's going to listen to you, there's always somebody that's going to say come here. There are good people in life and there are bad people, but there are good people. Think about that always.

I want young people to go to school, regardless of your gender or whatever. It's very important to read, it's very important to—all those people that went before us and that went through shit, they did it for a reason. Even when there was not a reason for it, they did it for a reason. They did it for us to be happy. Respect your elders, respect people and life. Respect yourself. That's all you need to do, respect yourself. If you respect yourself, you will respect others because you want to be treated the same way that you treat others. So, it's simple. Life is simple. Don't complicate shit. Don't come up with weird words, don't complicate it.

And work with what you have. Sometimes you have very little, sometimes you have a lot. We all have a story, we all have something to say, we have a story to tell. Think about that. Think where you come from, what got you there, why you're here. There has to be a reason. And that's so very cliché and people might think that, but there's a reason why. There's a reason why you're here, there's a reason why you—and maybe you're not going to discover a new energy or you're not going to never design the car that you wanted to design; maybe you're here for a total different reason, to do drag and to write shit. Look at Julián. He lives being homosexual, and being a queer person, and he's doing it beautifully and he's conquering people's minds, and that's amazing.

You have to have a lot of balls to conquer people's minds because what you discover there, it might be rotten and it might be weird and dark, it's a risk that you're taking with your own life. And everything in life is like that. When you are a doctor, you take risks every day; when you're a surgeon, you open up, you don't know what you're going to find. And I think to this day we still discover viruses and new species and new—so life is rich and it's always going to be rich. And in my youth, the things that happened in my youth are happening to the youth of these days in a different way. So, think about that. I think I want to believe in humanity, and I think we're learning. Among all these dark times and all that, we're learning. And the future is bright if we want it to.

Q: You feel that the future is bright for queer and trans people?

Vázquez: Oh, yes. Look at where we're at. It's just you and me here talking but you think the queer at large are going to allow people to come and like oppress them again? No. No, child, there's going to be somebody who's going to say, "Fuck that. Fuck off. Get off my dress." I don't want you to oppress me. And that's going to happen. It happened before, back in the '70s, and we didn't know half of what we know now. We were pioneers in many ways. We learned how to fight AIDS and that was very important. And people looked at us, other communities, to learn how to deal with this issue.

So, we are pioneers. We also conquered things and difficult things. AIDS was not easy. Still people die from AIDS to this day. But in the '80s and '90s, that was ridiculous. It was a very

depressing time. And among all that depression, we had beautiful people that were there doing drag and being transgender and being oppressed. And we saw the life and we took a good look at it and we learned. With pain, with a lot of sorrow, but we learned. And that cannot be forgotten. So, that's a good one.

Q: That really is. So, my last question—

Vázquez: Go ahead.

Q: —the grand finale maybe [*laughter*] for now, only for now, because life continues. Pero, if we think of stories as a kind of cultural inheritance and the stories that you've generously given today are like a herencia cultural, no? What is it you most want younger and future generations, especially of queer folks, to see or carry with them about your life?

Vázquez: Hm. There are many immigrants. That I have to leave my country to become happy. And in the Roman times, when you did something wrong, they expelled you from your community. Te desterraban. “Vete fuera de esta comunidad y tienes que hacerla” y you don't know what's going to happen. That was a capital castigo. Como decirte, “Vamos a ahorcar. Vete.” Y te sacaban de la comunidad and that was—I went through that. In the twentieth century, after many people have died for that and suffer that, I suffered. In a different way, but I suffered big time.

And I could've been very happy in my country and prospered there and been a beautiful transgender and have a program there and whatever. Maybe even bigger. But because of an idea that doesn't work—communism—I have to leave to save myself. And so I have to save myself, let in a new culture—which is fucked up because I'm twenty years old, after twenty years old you leave your country and you come to here. I didn't know how to talk, I didn't know how to walk anywhere. I didn't know anybody. So, it's like born again but you're twenty years old now. And you have to leave life behind to become—you find another one and learn the culture of this other culture—the new life. From zero. From zero. You are new. It's like you just come out of the womb, but you just don't have a mother. You're in your own, and that is not easy.

You have to be very strong, you have to be very smart, and you have to navigate waters that are very turbid. Ridiculous. I mean, you're going to be with people that you don't—and every generation, which is every 30 years, you get new people that are different ways and you get—and I'm not talking about the cliché like the honeymooners and the whatever, whatever. No. I'm talking about the new group of people that come and they're going to bring with them a new set of problems, a new set of beautiful, a new set of knowledge. You learn. You continuously learn.

And the important thing is—like, what I don't understand, actually, about life in my time is how come people are not free? I mean, if we understand all this stuff and you're agreeing with me when I say things like that, how can we not be visible and stop war and shit like that?

Colonialism, which is pretty much the root of all wars, is way out of fashion. You know, it's like please, get with the program! You know what I'm saying? *[Laughs]* And it's not going to happen, it's not going to happen. Look at Venezuela, which was a very prosperous country. They

had everything going on for them. For that ideal, they never really worked because when [Vladimir] Lenin and [Karl] Marx thought about it—the Soviet Union was communist for like eighty-some years, almost 100 years. And then it didn't work. It collapsed.

Q: It took enormous creativity and courage for you to make a life here as an immigrant.

Vázquez: Yes, yes. And it could've been better. I lost a lot of time—not that I lost, I didn't lost a lot of time, I was living my way. I could've go to school again and I cou—but I didn't have the time. I wanted to do drugs, I wanted to have fun, I wanted to go to the—it was my route. I did it gratefully. Like I said, I never been in jail, I never—I don't have that bitterness in me that said, “Oh, life”—no, life has been very kind with me. And for that I'm very, very, very thankful. And for my health, for that, for the ability—it's like you go to school and you learn your ways. And if you know, you learn it.

And another thing that I hate is like—one of the things that I hate, which is not many, is when people cannot leave their family cycle behind and say now, I live with a motherfucker, that family was wrong. Now I'm in a different place, I have this set of opportunities, let me live different—let me learn and get out of the hole. If you cannot pull yourself from the hole, from the very beginning, you are not going to make it. And you better pay attention to that because making it is—you have to be happy. If you cannot find yourself, you cannot find your own happiness, you are doomed. You are going to go to places that you don't want to be.

And don't be a victim, either. Victim is another way to make yourself go wrong. Victim who—it's not too cute. It doesn't work for me. I don't think it works for many people. Victim is that part of you that is just like dark, and people don't understand it. Victim, okay, I'm sorry, bye-bye, next! Because people have no time. People are busy. And the more that we—we're seeing it. The more times that happen, the busier and more careless people is. It takes very, very—it takes work to be kind. Let's put it that way. It takes a lot of work to be kind because people are too sheltered. If you have something going on for you, you want to shelter it to the point that it's not going to be healthy. And people don't want to share.

And it's okay. People will do eventually if they get to know you—do you know how many times I've been a group where they say, "Oh, my God. You're the first transgender I ever met." And there's a lot of misconceptions about transgenders. They're going to fuck your boyfriend—and that happens. But I'm not going to do that. I'm not here to do that, I'm here to be happy with you. That's it. Be happy. Like I said, I'm an old hippie *[laughter]*. Be happy. Live and let live.

Q: Ahí va.

Vázquez: You know what I mean? And the thing is that it's like people are going to make mistakes and they're only going to learn through their mistakes. I cannot tell you to learn from my journey because—you might learn some if you wanted to, if you're paying attention, if you—a lot of people find me interesting and a lot of people have wrote their thesis on me and it's cute. I mean, I don't know these people anymore; after they finish with that, I never see them anymore. But it's fun to be like that, it's fun to be different in a way that you can help. Not

different in a way that you can like—I'm not doing it for myself. I don't get anything from sharing my life other than maybe for \$100. [*Laughter*] Which are very welcome. I'm going to keep being who I am regardless of \$100 and regardless—ambition's another thing. Ambition is not good. It's like when you become pretty ambitious—"avaricia rompe el saco" decía mi abuela. Avaricia rompe el saco. And it's true.

Q: Rompe el saco.

Vázquez: Rompe el saco, la bolsa.

Q: Acordaros de por qué estamos acá o la vida—como querer vivir la vida.

Vázquez: Compartir, compartir, compartir. No quiere decir que porque yo no te conozco antes o porque puede ser que no te vea nunca más, este momento tiene que ser desagradable.

Q: No. Igual puede ser un momento con significado, con bondad.

Vázquez: Polite.

Q: Sí, sí, por lo menos [*Laughs*].

Vázquez: Como menos, polite, ¿entiendes?

Q: Por lo menos.

Vázquez: Que podamos decir, “Ay, yo conocí a Caroline [*phonetic*], qué agradable.” No tú te fuiste y ya queda la mente limpia, no “Lo que le dije es una mentira.” No hay necesidad de eso. Y las personas se complican la vida. La vida puede ser muy sencilla. No solamente en el campo, en el medio de San Francisco y en medio de New York.

Q: Puede ser sencilla la vida.

Vázquez: Muy sencilla. Y es más bonita, es más bonita. Si tú no tienes los tools para una vida complicada—porque para mentir hay que tener lawyers y dinero y todas estas cosas—si tú no tienes esos, sencilla es mucho mejor. Live your life simple and say the truth.

Q: Muy bien.

Vázquez: Because la verdad, al final, la verdad is going to set you free.

Q: Sí. Muy bien.

Vázquez: De la única manera es poner tu verdad en tus manos.

Q: La verdad can set you free. The truth will set you free.

Vázquez: Will set you free regardless what your truth is. Might your truth be the wrongest truth, and you have to work to prove it. There was a time in my life where I had to prove every step that I—when I became a transgender and I decided to live as a woman, I had to explain myself. After many years and I thought I already didn't have to explain myself, no. The whole explaining myself began again and I had to do it many times. I had to come in different groups and say who I am and why I am. People want to know because they don't know you and you're wearing make-up and you're wearing façade and maybe you have to come out of there and show people who you are for them to like you. Or if they don't like you, to respect you. Just respect. I don't think that everybody have to like anybody; that's kind of weird. Very weird.

Q: [*Laughs*] Pero respeto.

Vázquez: Respeto es importante.

Q: Sí, importantísimo. Clave, ¿no?

Vázquez: Clave.

Q: Adela, muchísimas gracias.

Vázquez: Muchísimas gracias. Ha sido una tarde maravillosa.

Q: Ay, mismo digo yo, realmente. Maravillosa.

Vázquez: Como a mí me gusta hablar tanto, perfecto [*Laughter*].

Q: Bueno, es un don que usted tiene y gracias por compartirlo con nosotros.

Vázquez: Gracias.

Q: Realmente ha sido increíble.

Vázquez: Increíble, increíble, increíble. Y qué bueno que te conozco. Yo pensé que tú venías de otra parte del mundo.

Q: [*Laughs*]

Vázquez: Washington D.C., qué sé yo. Pero no, estás aquí en—

Q: Aquí nomás en Oakland [*California*].

Vázquez: —en Oakland.

Q: Muchísimas gracias.

Vázquez: Muchas gracias, corazón. Perfecto.

[END OF INTERVIEW]