

I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Silvana Salcido Esparza

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 Silvana Salcido Esparza conducted by Denice Frohman on February 11, 2023. 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.

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center

Session Number: 1

Narrator: Silvana Salcido Esparza

Location: Baja Cali, Mexico

Interviewer: Denice Frohman

Date: February 12, 2023

Q: I'm going to press record, and just going to open up by sharing, again, just, like, an overview of the project and some of the themes in the work. But really, this is your archive, so wherever the conversation goes, I'm going to follow your lead. So I'll share a little bit about the process of the oral history, and then we'll just ask one question to adjust the sounds. I'll ask you what we had for breakfast this morning, which was very delicious, thanks to Silvana's wife, Serena who is here.

So this oral history project, *I See My Light Shining*, is a fellowship of ten writers, I being one of them, and my focus is on interviewing Latino lesbian elders in women over fifty years old, primarily in the Northeast, with roots in the Northeast, but also all over the US. My hope through the oral history project, and also through the one woman show that I'm working on based on these interviews, and also on my journey as a Puerto Rican and Jewish lesbian, is to create a love letter to our community to ensure that our histories are recorded in public memory for the next generation of young, Latino/Latina queer kids, and also to celebrate your remarkable journey. I'm honored to be here, and I hope that these engagements are also just the beginning of a connection, which I think is as important as the oral history themselves.

Some of the themes that I have been exploring have been sort of pretty wide and spacious questions, like how have we survived and created futures in a world that wants us to feel

ashamed and broken? I've been thinking of gathering spaces—bars, parks, marches, conferences, kitchens, salas, where we have formal and informal spaces where we've gathered, whether to organize or to eat, or to commune. I've also been talking through and exploring gender expectations—how we dress, how we wear our hair, masculine, feminine, and then obviously also activism, which I see in a really wide context, because not everyone who's part of this project considers them an activist, but their work is about social change, and is about making spaces for us. So this project is part archive and part art. And this is really just a conversation, an open-ended conversation.

This is sort of an invitation for me to walk with you, and for you to retrace the steps that have brought you here. And it's an invitation for me to learn what I need to know to understand you, to see you, to hear your remarkable story that is continuing. Nyssa Chow, something that I like to reference in the oral history technique in the interview, Nyssa Chow said, "Memory is translation, it's not the thing that happened, it's the thing that happened plus what it means." And so oftentimes, we'll be talking; sure, dates will come up, events will come up, but what I'm interested in is asking you, how does that change you? What did you learn from that? Does that make sense?

Hazelwood: Mm-hmm.

Esparza: Totally.

Q: Yes? We're just going to rock out and flow, you know? Oh, they did double-sided. Awesome.

Hazelwood: I was going to get a few for talking.

Q: Oh, okay, great.

Hazelwood: Is it—for practice.

Q: You can stay in here.

Hazelwood: But that was so beautiful, I had to stop and just be, like, oh!

Q: Yes. It's a lot of information, so I just like to share again, and get us in a headspace. But again, yes, I am working on a one woman show, but this is your story, this is your collection. This is, when they click on your name, that is its own thing, right? So I don't want you to feel like you have to, you know, not that you do, but that you have to talk about any particular thing, or we can skip things if you don't want to. It's really, really up to you.

So first, I'm going to ask you the easy question; what did you have for breakfast today? And actually, I might need my phone, because I'm going to start double-recording—

Hazelwood: Okay. Okay.

Q: If that's all right.

Hazelwood: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: Just in case, we don't lose anything, we have it all. Look at this. You have shots of shot? Oh my God, this is great. [*Laughter*] She's a good one. Are you an American?

Esparza: I'm an American at least ten times.

Q: This is Silvana's wife, Serena, taking these beautiful pictures of us. This is great, I got a little distracted. Okay, I am going to start recording on my phone, here we go, just as a backup-backup. You don't have to pay attention to this. All rightie, I've put this over here. All right. I'm sitting down with Silvana Salcido Esparza, and my first question is, what did we have for breakfast this morning?

Esparza: We had perfectly cooked, multicolored potatoes from South America, with the origin in the Americas. And my wife walked outside and cut fresh rosemary and added it to those potatoes, and olive oil, and some mantequilla and spices. Then Trader Joe's, believe it or not, has terrific bacon, so she perfectly cooked that bacon, and then made the most delicious brioche, French toast with whole maple syrup and mantequilla, and lots of conversation. And that's what we had for breakfast.

Q: I have to cosign—

Esparza: Y el café, y el café.

Q: Café, siempre café. I have to second that. I have to second that. It was a delicious, delicious breakfast.

Hazelwood: Thank you, Serena.

Q: Besitos.

Esparza: Bonus points.

Q: Bonus points. Bonus points. I will say it was an incredible breakfast. We're to start the interview with just a very simple sort of a question. Can you please share your full name, your year of birth and your place of birth?

Esparza: My name is Silvana Salcido Esparza. I was born in San Fernando, California in 1960.

Q: And who are you bringing with you today, when we think about sitting down to have a conversation about our story, our journey? We know we don't get here alone, and so whether—you can interpret that question however you wish. Who's in the room with us today?

Esparza: Who I bring with me here today is not necessarily who I thought I would have brought, I don't know, ten, twenty years ago. Today I know that with me, whether I like it or not, are my

ancestors. They've been with me since Day One, I just didn't know that. But they always follow me. I stand on their shoulders. And I also bring with me the future, my grandniece, Rosalia Norr [*phonetic*], my nieces, the cooks in the kitchens, [*unclear*] chef, dale. We love you, chef. All those people, the future, come along. But I do know and recognize and acknowledge that I stand on indigenous land, that I come from that blood, and that I stand on their shoulders. And my ancestors come good and bad, we have to recognize and acknowledge that.

Q: Are there any particular ancestors that you feel are incredibly close to you that you're thinking of right now?

Esparza: Oh, always my grandmother, Silvana [*phonetic*], she was—she filled a void. I always say that people who had the privilege of growing up with a grandmother in their home are kind of extra special. We have—of course, depending on the grandmother, you know? Those grandmothers that ay, Dios mío, you don't want them in your home. But mine was a Tarahumara, descendant of Tarahumara indigenous culture, the Rarámuri. And she was born into indentured servitude in an hacienda where her mother and father were born, and her ancestors for three generations were born, as they came down from the hills to work for the conquerors, the Spanish.

And so she carried a lot of that colonial mentality. Her father had told her that she was not to learn how to read or write, so I watched my grandmother, at seventy, learn how to never write, but read, very elementary Spanish, so she could learn the Bible, pass a test, and change religions only to appease her daughter, my mother. But the fact that she didn't know how to read or write,

and I knew that, I used to have to write her letters for her daughters. I used to do many things. And as she got older in her seventies, seventy-four, to be specific, she learned how to read so she could read those letters, proof them before we sent them out. So before she was relying on me, a little eight-year-old kid with broken Spanish, to write those letters.

So she had no teeth. She could barely wear shoes. She always wore an apron. To the street she had an apron deluxe. So her, is the one that's always at my forefront, because she was born into poverty in lands that had once been her ancestors'. She had to walk mountains, the Sierra de la Martas, where she was born and raised. And then she had to exit in Exodus with her parents when they were kicked out of the hacienda. And they had to walk for days to get to [unclear] and then to Durango. And then she becomes a teenager right in the heart of where a bunch of [unclear]'s men would go, and to safeguard their virtue, they would have to hide in the cactus or hide under the house, the floorboards. She had stories, and she told me those stories. And I asked questions. And I asked a lot of questions. So that informed where she came from, and her power. And I knew that if she could do that, if she could walk mountains as a child, if she could endure death and famine and everything that went on during the Mexican Revolution, if she could endure the death of her husband and the Great Depression, if she—you know, her sister and her family had made it to the United States in the early 1900s, only to be deported with their American-born children back into Mexico. Having forced to leave their documents at the border, after they already had been sprayed with Zyklon B, the same things that Hitler used. And they had to go back and then be mistreated in their hometown for being gabachos.

So all of that I carry, I bring it forward because their story is my story. And it's my niece's story and her granddaughter's story. We have to celebrate and honor that, and remember and talk about it because when we look in the mirror in current times, we're going through the same stories. And it's a story of oppression, but it's most importantly taking oppression and turning it upside down, and making it into survival, and conquering victory. And sometimes conquering is just conquering yourself, that colonial mentality that has been embedded into you, such as being told you're a woman, you're not going to learn how to read or write. Your job is to clean the corn and make the masa, clean the house, go get the water, help out and be submissive. That was her future, and that was not the future that I saw in her.

And then my mother, third grade education, came to the United States. And at one point they had opened a total of six bakeries, Mexican bakeries, her and my father. But I knew very well that my father had the talent, the eight hundred years of baking in his blood. But my mother had the ability to go forward, las ganas, the desire, the drive to go forward. Whether she believed in that American dream or not, that's beside the point. She believed in survival, because she looked back and she saw where her mother came from.

So those are the two women that I had as examples. So what I did is, instead of carrying that mentality of be submissive not only to your husband, as far as with your husband, but to El Amo, the Lord, the boss, right? To my mother—I love that my mother told me that I'm Mexican, even though I was born in the United States—

Q: I wanted to ask you about that, because so much of your work is about changing perceptions of Mexican culture, of sharing Mexican culture with so much pride and dignity, uplifting, Mexican food. And we were talking about this before, but what would you say to younger kids who don't speak Spanish, who may not feel Mexican enough?

Esparza: I don't know, you know, I went through that. And I think we all have our own individual battles. Nobody could answer that for you. You have to walk it. But if somebody kind of enlightens you a little bit, perhaps that cultural battle that we feel, you know, there's a cultural identity crisis that happens. I can speak for myself. I was a first-born "American," whatever that means. But I was born in the United States. I was born in actually land that had been in my ancestors, simple as that, you know? I'm Tijuana, I'm Tarahumara, I'm Rarámuri, I'm Tepehuanes, I'm Mexica, I'm a descendant of Moctezuma himself, many times. And I know that my people come from these lands. I feel it. I know it. And before they were called "America," when it was called Turtle Island, that's where I come from, I feel it. That's where my roots are at. And as much as I have European roots in my blood, and as royal as they may be, they mean nothing to me. It's the indigenous, because that's where my grandmother, my closest example to the land, comes from. And it runs thick in my blood.

So because I was raised in the United States, no me quita lo mexicano, right? If I didn't speak Spanish as well as I do, I'm still Mexican. I'm a Chicana, I'm a Mexico Americana, I'm a Latinx, I'm whatever you want to call me—I don't care. I don't necessarily go by the rules. So listen—I'm a Mexican. And the only time I want to be called Latino or Latina or Latinx is when you're counting my vote, all right? Don't take my culture and my identity away. In fact, let's add

a few titles with commas. Mexicana, US resident, US national. Turtle Island descendant. Mexicana. Lesbiana. Curly hair, African blood. I'm proud of every last drop. And did you notice I didn't mention my Viking or Norwegian, or all this other blood that I have? That is colonized blood, and I cannot say it's not in me, it is. But I'm compelled by their actions, I'm not defined. And because of colonization, that [*unclear*] that happened, we're all a product of it. All of us. But I can embrace it, identify it, and learn from their mistakes, learn from the mistakes of people before me that believed in the rules that were prescribed for everybody. It's, like, I don't believe in that. I believe in the power of an individual, I believe in the power of the land that gives. I believe in the power of water, water is life. But I do not believe in the power of governing men.

You know, I grew up with a very rigorous religion, Jehovah's Witness. And it never felt right to me. I was a critical thinker in the religion, which is not a good thing. Cult-like behavior. Queer, dyslexic, bilingual—it was just a difficult situation, but I'm a very spiritual person. So it's easy to confuse spirituality for a religion, they're intertwined somehow. That's what they tap into. And I'm a descendant, direct descendant of the creators of Catholicism, and my family has been Catholic until my mother answered the door on a Saturday afternoon, a lonely immigrant on the other side of that door was her next best friend. So it did change her life, and it changed the trajectory of her children. But I'm the type of person that can see a negative and turn it into a positive, right? So within that religion, although I missed out on so many things, I got to learn to survive. I was already different, so now I had, on top of the labels that caused me to be different in society's view, I had a weird religion. So I had to deal and navigate through life. So that teaches you early on that you want to be like everybody else, but you're not. So I had that mirror

early on. And I think that is what has helped me navigate through life, being queerly different, and learning that I wasn't like everybody else, and that I didn't want to be like everybody else.

Q: What makes you feel most Chicana? You are incredibly proud of your heritage and your roots, you've done a lot of genealogy.

Esparza: Genealogy.

Q: Genealogy—

Esparza: And the DNA, and everything else.

Q: Yes. You've done a lot of work to understand your roots, your family tree, your indigenous roots. What makes you feel the most Chicana, Mexicana? And it could just be sounds, it could just be images, it could be food, tastes—

Esparza: Oh, you know what gets me every single time? [*Singing*] Dum, da dum, dam da-da-da-da--La Negra and the Mariachi, that first Chord of “dun”—every Mexican, se me enchina el cuero. I get that escalofrío, that little—what do you call it in English? But the little skin all standing up, and the hair standing up, and the nape of my hair, and on my arms. And it makes me want to go, “Oh,” you know, do that Mexican cheer, and grito; it's a grito. Que sale del corazón. It comes out of the heart, el vientre, your core. It identifies you. If you look at the history of Mexican music and all that, it's all colonized music. But somehow, we have taken everybody

else's music and instruments, and fused them together to make something that's very ours, and very national. And that makes me—gets me going. When I feel, I don't know, lost, nostalgic, missing somebody, for me—people talk about comfort food—anything Mexican. Una [unclear] de frijoles with tortillas that are a little crispy and a little burnt, that corn. It's my umbilical cord. That corn is my umbilical cord. I come from the daughters of the corn. I am a daughter of the corn. I listen to the messages of the wind that told me that I am a daughter of the corn. I forgot for a minute, I pretended to be a banker, but it was a short minute, because the universe had a wave pulling me, yanking me out and shoving me back in the kitchen, back at my dad's bakery. And I didn't listen to society more that said I had to wear the high heels and have the expensive BMW, and live in the—that was capitalism. And I was fortunate enough that that was just a short-lived period in my life. And ever since then, I never followed the money. I never followed what society tells me. I follow my heart.

So my superpower is that I'm dyslexic, so I don't get the rules until I live the rules. Then I can tell you, yes, that doesn't feel right. Or, what are the beautiful things about being fifty and older? I'm in my sixties now, and me vale poca madre what you think of me. I don't care what you think of me. That's always been the way I felt, perhaps because my mother was worried about what others would say. But it definitely has been fortified and sealed and ironed, now that I'm older, it's, like, you know what? You worry about your life, I'll worry about mine. And in my life, I don't worry about money. I worry about my community. I worry about my fellow man. I worry about the marginalized—which is usually queer in Mexican. Everybody has their like, but that's where I try to put my heart into.

Q: One of the things that you mentioned was that you come from a long line of bakers. Can you share with us a little bit more, give us some more insight on that history in your family? And also what coming from a long line of bakers taught you?

Esparza: Well, I come from a long line of bakers that are men, eight hundred years' worth of ancestors that are men. But the woman's hand has been very important in that, because I know the trajectory, I know that line. It hasn't been a Salcido line, Salcidos are minors, and actually is a [*unclear*] they're mine owners, they're merchants, they've done a lot of things in Chihuahua. But it's the Salcido, my great grandfather that married an Almazán [*phonetic*]. That Almazán was a daughter of a baker, so he learned from his father-in-law. Two generations later, again, it was the woman who taught the husband, and it was the de Cobos [*phonetic*]. If I go eight generations back, my eighth great grandfather was brother to Juana de Cobos. And Juana de Cobos has studied at the University of Chihuahua in Feminist Studies.

My tía, my baking tía was, as we say, a “chingona”—that means bad-ass. She wanted to bake in colonial Chihuahua in Colonial Mexico. It wasn't even called “Chihuahua,” it was called San Felipe. I mean, it was a tiny, little place, it was a villa, San Bartolomé, old European names. And she wanted to bake, because her father—her brothers were baking. But she wanted to bake. So she made it happen. And the reason there's so much records is because she was a ruckus, she was a peleonera, she was always not putting up with the rules, such as fighting against the Bakers Guild that controlled the cost of all baking supplies, including the cost of bread. Fighting against the mayor, fighting against—they had to actually move her from her property and put her outside the city limits. And that didn't stop her, because the people of the city loved her, and her prices,

and her quality bread. A woman's touch—they say a woman's place is in the kitchen, but when you get out in the commercial world, what is it, *puro viejo*, right, nothing but men. So when you have a kitchen that has that woman's touch, it's sensitive—the food, the bread.

If you look around—I went to culinary school—if you look around, a lot of the bakers are women. It's like a segregated, oh, you're going to culinary school, you must want to learn how to bake. And a lot of women, yes, they want to bake, because they already know that in the professional world, the men are the ones that are ruling, and it's hard to fight. So I imagine Juana de Cobos in colonial Mexico in 1700, where you couldn't even walk the street without your husband, you couldn't walk on the outside of your husband's arm, you had to walk on the inside—there were so many rules. She fought against all of that. And that's where I come from, that, and more.

My ancestor—we go back to medieval Spain, during the 1200s, where my ancestor was—my direct ancestor was a royal pastry chef for the King of Spain, Alfonso El Sabio. It turns out Alfonso El Sabio is also my direct ancestor. So there's a history in my family of connections; Alfonso El Sabio and his royal pastry chef. My mom and dad met at a bakery. My little grandniece, Rosa, is the daughter of my niece, Alyssa [*phonetic*], who was working my line at the Barrio Café, hooked up with the dishwasher, the new dishwasher, who's now a cook and a chef. But I'm a product of bakery love. And there's many generations in my family that are products of that connection.

Q: And I assume you grew up working in the bakery, or helping out?

Esparza: Since age six.

Q: Since age six.

Esparza: Yes. By fourteen, I was running a register, and by fifteen I had my own carnitas business inside the bakery. By eighteen, I had a little taquería, a little eatery. Then I said, okay, enough, I don't want to do this. It's hot, it's dirty. You get a lot of cleaning up to do. And you know, it's for Mexicans. I wanted to go explore the other side, how white people live. So I moved to Miami. I had some friends that moved there, and I ended up in Miami. And I actually married a redneck from Palm Beach County. And that was interesting in the sense that I was the Mexican in an all-white community. And a Mexican in a place where there are no other Mexicans. So slowly, after five years of marriage, I woke up one day queer, so that was the first thing. So I had to leave the husband and the religion, and my community. So if I was "going off the deep end," then I might as well go back to what I know. There was a little rabbit hole that I jumped in, and I went vámonos, and it took me right back to the dirty little towns where migrants worked, where the fields are at, where my dad was selling bread to the migrant workers. And when I left, maybe I was a little critical, like, I never want to do this. But when I came back, I was basically on my knees, "I want to do this."

So at age twenty-seven, I started working at my dad's bakery in Lamont, California, again, after living in Fort Lauderdale, Miami, Palm Beach, having a BMW, Neiman Marcus, being on boats, and be inter-coastal and jumping off, and having drinks—you know, that life, scuba diving,

skiing. I come back a lesbian, chopped off my hair. Now I'm wearing a men's shirt here and there. My mother's noticing that I don't go to church. She's noticing a little difference. She starts questioning me. And I had to endure that as well. It would have been easier to stay in Florida.

Q: I'm sitting here thinking about the Silvana that was in Florida and the Silvana that I see in front of me, and it's almost like there were two different not only periods, but two different visions of life, two different expectations of how to live a life. And I guess I'm curious to dig a little bit more into what that awakening was, what that transformation felt like. What was sort of the first inkling or moment that you realized that you were a lesbian? Or maybe that you had this desire, so to speak, right, that you were attracted to women. Did you know any lesbians, growing up? Or can you share—take us back to that time to when did this sort of take place, this transformation, or this awakening that you were attracted to women, while you were married, which is—

Esparza: Forget when I was married, my friend.

Q: We've got to go back further?

Esparza: We have to go back to kindergarten.

Q: Take us back to kindergarten.

Esparza: This beautiful, young, young teacher, you know, they stick the young ones in kindergarten, a little white girl. She was probably twenty-four, fresh out of college, for all I know. And here's this little Mexican girl in LA, wearing dresses where all the other kids are wearing pants. And she would say, "Who wants to go for the milk?" Every single day, little Silvana's out there raising her—right? So right away, I knew—

Q: You knew you were different. You knew, yes.

Esparza: I know I was different. I had a crush on my kindergarten teacher.

Q: Yes.

Esparza: And as I grew, and we became Jehovah's Witnesses, then I had to start studying the religion at age five. I knew how to read or write in Spanish before English, it really messed with my dyslexia. So in school, I was, "dumb," yet I could read and write Spanish. But nonetheless, it was there. But as I got older, I had to stuff it, because, you know, Jehovah knows your thoughts. Armageddon is coming. Can you imagine being a little kid and living with the threat of the end of the world, the Apocalypse? It really screws with your psyche, right? So I shoved it all down, years of—and I was very footloose and fancy free, being an elder's daughter, meaning that I pushed it as far as I could, and I was able to still be a muchacha de casa, which means a good girl, from a good home. But I loved to ski, and I loved to go to concerts, and fine dining, I was fine dining since I was a kid. So I sold carnitas at fifteen, so I had bank. There's money in food.

So I had to negotiate with my parents, “Listen, I don’t have friends. You don’t allow me because of the religion, we’re not part of this world to have friends.” When I do have friends now that are older than I, it’s not my fault, of the religion, I want to go with them on weekends. So I want to go skiing. So I would have to negotiate. So I learned negotiation skills. I learned to advocate for myself, and critical thinking. These things don’t make sense to me. I get married, because that’s what you’re supposed to do. I got married a virgin. You know, a lot of people can say, oh, of course you’re a lesbian, you didn’t like guys. No, I didn’t like girls either, I just, you know, it didn’t matter. I wasn’t attracted to girls or men. But I was told. So I met a beautiful man, I got married. I was married for five years. And at age twenty-five, I saw a freaking movie, a movie called *The Hunger*, Catherine Deneuve, Susan Sarandon, vampires. You know, eighties kind of movie, kind of groovy, you know, techno music, David Bowie’s in it. And then they kiss, and I’m, like, “What the high”—and it wasn’t the first time I had seen it, but the first time I had seen it not in some B horror, ugly, like, lesbians in jail, or something. And it wasn’t like, you know, like Mexican food. Like, it was real—when I see Mexican food in the United States, I know that’s not real. So before, I wasn’t affected by any kiss, because it wasn’t real. But in that movie, at that moment, and at that age, that was it.

So I’m the kind of girl that I like to take action. So I took action. I left my husband. Then I went out and figured things out. I didn’t jump into a relationship or anything, I didn’t become—it took almost a year. But I had to go be alone for the first time. Didn’t go from my parents’ house to a husband’s house. I learned independence—well, I had independence as a child, but I learned independence as a woman.

Q: Yes.

Esparza: And that's it. I became responsible for myself from there on in.

Q: Were there certain family members who were supportive or really challenged by your sexuality?

Esparza: Supportive—zero. You're talking 1985, Jehovah's Witness religion, father's an elder. Challenged everybody, even the ones that were a little bit more progressive, were still challenged. At one point, after, I don't know, less than a year of living back in the same town as my parents—

Q: And where were they at that time?

Esparza: They were in Bakersfield, California.

Q: In Bakersfield.

Esparza: They pulled me aside, and my brother, the elder, sat there like if I was in trouble. I'm almost twenty-six year—I was twenty-six years old. And he asked me questions, like if I was in the judicial committee at the Jehovah's Witness. And I looked at him, and I said, "Well, I don't see how any of your questions are none of your business." And I walked out. You see, the message I got always was, my mother told me, "Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente," eyes

that do not see, heart that does not feel. Basically I understood, keep your life private. So I did. And it stayed like that for the seven years until she became sick, and I was ready to leave the area. I was going to go to culinary school. I had been cooking and finding my love for the food, in spite of having somewhat very mommy-like, daddy-like, you know, family light. And she became sick, with terminal cancer at age fifty-seven. It was a no-brainer, I didn't think about it for a second. I wrote her a letter. She wasn't good with words, and I said, "Hey, I'll put my school, my life on hold, I'll move, if you like, and I'll take care of you until you feel better." And I did that for a year. It was perfect for both of us. It was an opportunity.

See, I kept telling my siblings, "Hey, you all better get with it, mom's going to die." And maybe they were in disbelief. My sister kicked in and came as well. But I saw some of my other siblings not—you know, and I didn't waste a minute. I was away from her one weekend, and that weekend is when she started going down even more. I didn't waste a minute. It wasn't a sacrifice, it was an honor. It was a pleasure.

A few things happened. She got to see me for who I was, once again, not who she imagined. The last Silvanita [*phonetic*] she loved, and was so proud of to the point where she had my wedding picture in the size of a life-size wedding picture, was a model, had been a model. She had been the little darling of the congregation. She had good jobs, successful. Shopped at expensive stores—she liked that. The Silvana she had before her had taken that heteronormative expectation that had been given to me, and shed it. In fact, when she saw me last, I had zero hair. I had shaved it down.

Q: How did she feel about that?

Esparza: I was living with her when I did it first, and I told her, I go, “Mom, I’m going to go shave my head.” She goes, “Why?” I said, “Well, it seems that I have psoriasis in my head, stress-related, I’m sure, but I can’t stand it. And I read somewhere that vitamin D, the sun, so I’m going to shave my long, curly hair.” And I shaved it off. And I came out of the bathroom, you know, of course I did a little drag and put on some black clothes. But I came out of the bathroom, and she went [*gasps*]. And she stared at me and put on her glasses. She said, “Come here.” She goes, “You look absolutely stunningly beautiful. Te ves hermosa.” Here I thought, ay, parece hombre, marimacha. No. She also was able to take those colonial glasses off and see me for me. And I was beautiful, I looked great. I have that photo, I said, “Then take a picture of me.” And she did.

Q: Did it—it sounds like it took her time from when you first started to tell your family that you were attracted to women, to that moment. Was there—did it take her some—did it take her time?

Esparza: Yes, it took her—

Q: I mean, it sounded like it took her a while.

Esparza: Yes, it took her having a terminal disease—

Q: Do you feel like she shifted—

Esparza: —to be able to go home to herself, to ever—to be able to take those glasses off and see me differently. I don't blame her, I can't, you know, say that it's her fault. Just like my grandmother who wasn't allowed to read or write, or explore her intellect. She had to do it masterfully in other ways, like she could crochet masterful things, I mean masterful. She could do so many things that required math and talent, but she couldn't read. But she mastered that. And I think at the very end, my mother mastered her bias, her prejudice. She was one of those people that was born very white in Mexico. Her mother was descendent of Tarahumara, who hid her indigenous roots. She had just enough Mexican in her to give her a little question mark, like, but I used to say, "Hey, you're indigenous," or at that time we used to say "Eres india," and she would say, "No, cállate. Cállate, esas cosas no se dicen. You don't say those things, be quiet." I'd be, like, why? "Cállate," and that was the answer, "Cállate." That never sat well with me.

Her sister, her younger sister, did learn how to write, because when their father died, the master, for lack of, you know, the amo de la casa, the owner of the hacienda, taught them, or attempted to teach my grandmother, but taught the younger one, who did learn. She left a twelve-page letter, talking about them being Tarahumara and hiding it. And I've had to do a lot of research on the family and the culture. If you look over here, I have a whole section just on Tarahumaras and Tepehuanes and Chihuahua and the culture. I have a book there, it's called *A Decade of Betrayal*, that speaks about being betrayed as American children of Mexican immigrants and sent back to Mexico. That is my research on why that had that compartment that was handed down to my mother, that was handed down to me. And although I refused it, I still was part of it; I still

married a man. I was a little dyke since I was a little girl. I was a little chef since I was a little girl. It didn't matter how many obstacles they put in front of me.

When you start living a true, genuine self, you're going to discover you. You know, I didn't want to be a baker's daughter or a baker, or a panadera, or own a panadería or even get into that work. I came back with an empty soul. And that's the only thing that filled it, that started filling it. That's where I start finding my passion, my completeness, going back to my roots. Going back to my mexicanismo after being Silvana Hamilton. Silvana Hamilton. I could pass for so many things. Jamaican, African American, Creole—I could pass for many things at that time. But to be a Mexicana and then struggle being a Mexicana to other Mexicanos, right, because I don't look Mexicana. And I don't necessarily act like a Mexicana, but—so I was Mexicana and Chicana. You know?

And nopal, that cactus, I have it right here, it's engraved in my forehead. It's visible to those who want to see it. And if you don't believe me, talk to me and you will find out, que es tan chicana, Mexicana, Mexica, Tarahumara, Raramurí, Tepehuanes, Tijua [*phonetic*] soy. And that's just what I know. And I know there's more, porque me llaman. They call, they whisper in the wind. And all I have to do is listen. And sometimes when I don't listen, I get slapped against the face with a hurricane, and I have to listen. And you go back on course. But being on course, you know, doesn't mean you have to stay in your lane.

Q: Where—I'm curious—where does this—you have this energy about you, this, some might call it “defiant,” but I might call it very—you're in your body and you don't let people push you

around. You don't let people make you feel smaller. But I can't imagine that was always that way. But, like, where does that fire inside you come from? And not only being a proud chingona, pero también being una lesbiana también, and not being ashamed of either of those things, where does that fight, that unwillingness to compromise, that, this is who I am, right? Where do you think that comes from? Because I can't imagine that was—that maybe it always looked like that, or always felt like that.

Esparza: I think it's part of my personality as well. And I say "as well," is that I have that ability to take a negative and turn it into a positive, to ascend from the ashes, to be able to burn down every time. Sometimes the fire doesn't come from me, and sometimes I'm the one not only lighting it, but putting lighter fluid on it, make sure it gets good and big. I'm not afraid of much, especially, like, the outside, the perception of others and the opinions. I'm, you know, it's reflected in my food, hey, look, this is my attitude. Come eat my food. Si te gusta, bien, si no te gusta, pues, ni modo. Go back to your yellow cheese, fake Mexican food, it doesn't matter. I don't even say I do Mexican food. What I do is cocina de autor, and I'm the author, and it's my kitchen. I'm the creative. It is, however, Mexican-inspired. Grandma-inspired. Frijolitos de la olla con jocoque from Chihuahua, tortillas quemadas. Chicharroncitos.

Now if I take those chicharrones and I grind them up, and I use them as a, you know, something powdery, or make a foam—that's up to me. But those inspirations? I could tell you that on my menu, every last one of those, I can tell you were in hell I was inspired to write that dish. And that's very important. I heard a long time ago, it was out of my mom's little advice, she would always advise me with dichos, and she said, "No dejes que te platiquen; tú platica." "Don't let

somebody tell you the story. You be the storyteller.” That made sense to me, because I am a storyteller. I have to go out as a ten-year-old with ten dollars for a piano lesson, riding my bike three miles into downtown Merced [California], and then take that piano lesson as dyslexic—very difficult to learn how to read music. But guess what, I can play music by ear, so I would fake it. And then the lady was a little racist hater that would hit my hands, so I stopped going. I pocket those ten bucks, and then I would go home and say, “Mom, check this song out.” And I would play “Spanish Eyes,” by ear. And she would sit there and just love it. Well, that independence those ten dollars gave me, she figured it out eventually. But that taste of independence, of being on the bike, of knowing that—you know, rolling through downtown and running in to the comic book store and buying comics. That was, one, a cultural history that neither of my parents had. So that was the first time having that flavor, that American, if you will, independence. Then I had to teach her that it was okay.

So it started then. And I’m still like that. I still will take my ten dollars and forget the piano lesson. I can figure out how to play the piano by myself, and go. And go and go and go, and talk to people. When I was a kid, I would talk to the guy at the rock shop, at Jimmy’s Liquors, who sold me my comics. They thought it was cute, the little girl’s coming in with money and spending it like a regular. Well, I still do that. I still support my regular places. And I still not necessarily ride my bike, but maybe my lowrider. And I go to the right places, and I support my community. But I learned that as a little girl.

Q: Something that you mentioned, was that in all of your recipes, when people go to your restaurant and they taste your food, that you trace back each ingredient, there’s a story that

you're trying to tell. So much of your own indigenous roots lives throughout not just only your life, but your culinary work. I was interested if you could share a little bit about how—because as you said, you're not only a chef, you're a historian, you're a storyteller. You play music by ear, right? You're such an embodied—the way you move throughout the world is just so embodied. But you also studied these regional cuisines, you studied these indigenous culinary traditions in Oaxaca and in other places in Mexico. I was wondering if you could share a little—because it's so important to your identity, but also to the food that you make. It lives there. You might remix it, but it's living there. Can you share a little bit about those experiences with us?

Esparza: Well, those experiences are about our abuelas. Your abuela, the abuela of the little immigrant kid that came to the United States at age one, who's never been able to go back to Mexico, who never got to see his great grandmother or grandmother in the kitchen ever again, right, that cutoff that happens when people come to the United States, and they don't have the documentation to go back. That doesn't take that away from you.

So my grandmother dies four years later, in the same house my mother dies. And four years later, I am on a bus out of Phoenix with my 401K money in the bank, with an excellent job, and traveling to El Paso to go to Juarez, to go south. I had a scholarship from a big group of culinarians to go study with a chef in Oaxaca, so I took six months to travel to get there, slowly. Well, in those six months, I had gone from—I started following the holidays, right? So I ended up in el día dos de febrero, the second of February, the tiny little town of [unclear] Veracruz, Son Jaroco, el Día de la Candelaria [sic], all these things that, that's only local people that know about that. But because I was on a bus talking to a woman, I got invited. Because I was on a bus

talking to a woman, I'm Puebla, making candy with the family. I'm in Guatzala [*phonetic*], cooking with an indigenous woman that hardly speaks any Spanish. She speaks Nahuatl. All this experience I had, before I get to this chef in Oaxaca, I was, as we say, bien curtidita; I was already pickled and good, on point.

So I get there, she's a North American from New York. And two days tops, I couldn't put my head around it, I didn't have the language for it, but I had the feelings. And I got out of there. I wrote her a really nice note, I thanked her, and I got out of there. It was later that I felt that—I realized that it was a North American woman who had appropriated recipes from indigenous women of the area, and then was regurgitating them back to North American tourists for dollars, and then cutting out these women. I never—I used that as an example of something I never want to do or be. I am not the expert, they are.

So as fate, the universe, my god or just luck, I end up at the taquilla, the sales booth for the bus with my lonely planet, because I have plans for six months to stay at this place with this woman, the chef, to learn Oaxacan food. That was my scholarship. And I didn't have a plan, so I was kind of, like, dead energy that day, as I'm standing there looking at, where am I going to go? What is that? I can't even pronounce these towns. Where do I go next? Try to go home? Pero ya andaba picada, I already have that need, that want, for more, because I already had experience, some really deep ancestral women that carry that traditional kitchen, Mexican kitchen, cocina ancestral. So I'm standing there at the bus terminal, when a woman in a full gala, huipil and rabona, the dress from Oaxaca, Frida Kahlo dressed like them. And she comes in like a duck with little ducklings behind her, other women dressed just like her. But you could see by how

they stayed away and grouped together that there was a, I'm the leader and you're the follower. There was, like, a respect.

And she said, "Espérenme," and they said, "Sí, licenciada." And she goes to me, "¿Qué estás haciendo?" "What are you doing?" And I said, "Oh, perdón," I thought I was in her way. I said, "Pase, pase," you know, "I'm sorry." And then she says, "No, why are you standing there looking up and down from your book to the board? Do you know where you're going?" I must have had a look, or there must have been a pulling of the universe. And I told her briefly, I'm running away from a place that felt wrong. She said, not to me, but to the woman at the sales counter, she goes, "Dale un boleto para que se siente conmigo." "Give her a ticket." "Sell her a ticket so she can sit with me." And she did.

So for the next over four hours, we rode the bus south from Oaxaca City, and we talked, and she told me about this place that we were going to, a region in Oaxaca where tourists don't go. And it's called El Istmo de Tehuantepec. And we ended up in a place called Juchitán Zaragoza, also previously known as Juchitán de Las Mujeres, and the Las Mujeres part is, like, what? Women? What is that? So we got off the bus, and she goes, "Go that way. The mercado's there, that's where you're going to find what you're missing." An older woman, probably my age now. I'm forty. And I said, "Well, let me have your name and number," you know, like a dumbass. And she said, "You don't need my number in this town. Just ask for la licenciada Toledo." And I'm writing, "To-le-do"—right. And she looks at me and she goes, "No seas pendeja, yo soy la hermana de Francisco Toledo." "Don't be a dumbass, I am the sister of Francisco Toledo." I was a dumbass, because I didn't know who Francisco Toledo was; ignoraba quién era. He just passed

away a couple of years ago. He is one of Mexico's greatest painters, from Oaxaca. You go to any museum in Oaxaca, you will see his art. Google it. And here I am sitting with his sister, my fairy godmother Mexicana.

She delivered me into—

[END OF FILE A]

[BEGIN FILE B]

Esparza: a place in Tehuantepec, en el Istmo, where women are the leaders, where the patriarch is secondary. They have a third sex called muxes, and it's celebrated, where a woman like me, overweight—I was sick and I didn't know it—bald, completely shaved my head, very—at least once a month, tatted up, una forastera, an outsider can be embraced, taken under their wing, and given an injection of love and cultura like I had never felt anywhere else. And I had been around different cultures, Maya, Otomi, many other. But these Zapotec women, they could see that I was broken. They could see that I was good, una mujer buena, I just needed un soplo de la vida, like a tortilla when the masa hits the griddle and it puffs up in that breath of life. El soplo de la vida, that's exactly how I feel, like, they just—phew—into me, and they filled me with vigor, love, yo sí puedo. I've always had the “yo sí puedo, sí se puede” attitude. But they're the women who run the town. They're the women that when a mother dies, she leaves the properties to her daughters. It's been like that, Zipolite [*phonetic*], San Agustínillo, all of that region—fantastic! Every little town has a huipil that identifies them, ya sea huipil de familia o de región. The food is ancestral.

You know, Oaxaca is the cradle of Mexico's culture in food, gastronomic. De allí nació la cultura de la cocina mexicano; de allí nació lo que ahora conocemos como la cocina mexicana. And it spreads out, Puebla, it spreads out to the coast, south, into Chiapas. But it's Oaxaca where there's a cave that's carbon dated 10,000 years ago—they found undomesticated tenocitle, which is the corn, and domesticated, maíz palomero, proof of both. They found the ingredients for mole, the chiles, the dried fruits. Mole comes from Oaxaca. There's always been a fight about, where does mole come from? Puebla or Oaxaca? If you look at Mexico's national dish, it is el mole poblano—not just mole, mole poblano—very specific.

Wherr-wherr—they missed the boat on that one, because the mole poblano is a colonized mole invented by the nuns that they took from the indigenous that were working in the convents. Like, I can imagine a Martha Stewart of nuns going, “¿Qué es eso, María?” And María saying, “Mole.” “¿Mo—mole? Qué es eso?” And then, ooh, how about we add these little European ingredients? So it's a fusion, it's modern-day fusion of colonial Mexico. But the original mole, that goes way back to 10,000 years ago, not just 500.

What does that say about the culture of Mexico, or the racism of the gastronomic world, the gourmand world, right, where [Auguste] Escoffier names the five mother sauces. I paid a lot of money to go to culinary school to find out the colonized five mother sauces that have Mexican ingredients. Mexica, Mesoamerica is one of the seven centers of the world, gastronomically. Thirty-two ingredients that are worldwide today that are important in many cuisines come out of Mexico. La piña, pineapple, where Hawaii's crops be, and chili, I think of about any of the Asian foods that use the chili; the Thai, everybody, Chinese. What would that food taste without that

chili? The tomato, Italy. Those are modern—they're called "food pathways," when the food travels, whether it's from immigrant or from colonization.

And so I've been able to, since that standing in a bus terminal, I've been able to learn that the strings right here, el toque mexicano, you know? And it is that La Negra, that I scream with escaolofrío when I hear it, because it reminds me of *quién soy, de donde soy*. Much like my mother told me, I'll never forget, "Tú eres mexicana. Aquí o en Japón o en la China o en Europa. Tú eres Mexicana." And then I have the pedigree to prove it. Now I didn't have that information as a child, but I do now. And to be embraced in an area like Tehuantepec, and even in the *las fiestas de barrio, los bailes de barrios con los muxe*, right, and to be dressed—I was at a mercado, and this woman goes, "¿Te invito a una fiesta en la tirada de fruta?" I'm, like, okay. I'm wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and a little dyked out, you know, cropped hair, backpack, earrings—always earrings. She goes, "But you've got to dress up." I'm, like, "Okay, I'll wear my khaki pants." She goes, "No, te vas a poner una falda, a rabona"—a skirt. Oh! I hadn't worn a skirt since my heterosexual days, and I used to go to church, even. I can tell you, 1985. And I'm, like, 2000, 2001, I'm, like, a skirt? She goes, "A huipil too." The whole outfit. La rabona y el huipil. The sash. "¿Sabes qué? Vamos a negociar." Let's negotiate.

"How about I wear the huipil with my jeans, I fold it up a little bit with the cute shoes, I'll put on some jewelry. But I won't wear the skirt. And I'll tell you why I won't wear the skirt. Porque yo no soy de aquí, and I'm feeling like I'm disrespecting your culture. I'm just here to observe, and not pretend to be of your culture." And she said, "Okay, but it's okay if you are here and you dress up, because I'm inviting you, because I'm telling you, because everybody is embraced

here. And when I went to the party, I danced with everybody. And the beautiful thing is that there was hardly any husbands there, it was mostly a respect of women. It was—they sit, the elders, now I would qualify to sit there. But they sit the elders in the middle, and then the younger women come out and ask them to dance. So you have these señoras dancing with these muchachas, and then they take a balloon or a peineta, a comb, gifts, and they put them in their hair out of a sign of respect. You know that town's run by women.

Q: Mm-hmm.

Esparza: You know that governance is run by women with muxe are a part of the everyday. It's non-binary there, and it's traditional from generations' ancestral stuff, pre-colonization.

Q: I was going to ask, what did you learn about yourself in Oaxaca at these ceremonies, seeing muxes, seeing people who are non-binary, whether you identify that way or not, but seeing people who are fluid and outside of a gender, binary? What did you—I don't know, what did you learn about yourself, or what did that feel like? In terms of your own identity?

Esparza: Like, finally looked at. Finally a place where the expectation doesn't exist. You're expected to comport yourself as a good member of society. But the expectation of dressing or behaving, or being—I call it “zombie-like,” you know, cattle. Follow the trend. Oh, everybody's wearing bangs now. Oh, brown girls are going blonde. Whatever it is, there's no expectation there. And everybody's embraced. It's a beautiful place.

Q: Was it—something that you mentioned in that moment with that woman in Oaxaca around the huipil and wearing a dress or skirt, was around—I'm curious to hear more about how you navigated those expectations of femininity throughout your life, dressing, navigating wearing dresses or not wearing dresses, but just, like, more broadly. How do you—how have you navigated those expectations of femininity that many women have to be—and also, how have you—what's the journey been like to also embrace your masculinity, or your masculine energy, this in-between fluid energy as well?

Esparza: I have two older brothers, I'm the first female of two. So the expectation in the 1960s and '50s would have been the heteronormative, the heterosexual normative. So I was the first daughter. But I know my mother knew I was queer, as the minute I started talking, or whatever I was doing. So she tried to force me in those dresses—those goddamned dresses—it was, oh my God, you know? Then the kids, I went to an all country, white school. You know, I learned Loretta Lynn and all that country stuff. I wanted Wranglers and Ropers, like everybody else. So what I learned is that no matter how different you are because you're wearing freaking dresses, you're Mexican, you speak with a funny accent, you don't know how to spell right—it doesn't matter if you don't fit in, because I didn't fit in there. I didn't fit in everywhere I went. I was always in a place that I didn't fit in. Always. Odd man out, stuck out like a sore thumb. Florida—skiing on the slopes, you don't see Mexicans out there. You don't see scuba diving Mexicans in South Florida in the early eighties. Everywhere I went.

I learned that—it's very interesting. I learned that white people have fun. They've got all the good shit. Since an early, young girl, I started taking myself out to eat with those ten dollars I

told you about, that I swiped from the piano lesson. I learned French dip, at this one little fish and chips place. They thought it was cute that a little sweaty girl that looked like a boy would come in 1970 and buy fish and chips. They hooked it up with the French dip, and I just became addicted. I learned things like pizza, I didn't know what pizza was before that. And that independence—so I was attracted to that. I went out and golfed, looking like a chola, but I went out and golfed to know what it's like to take up space. I used to go Hobie catting, now those are privileged things that people who don't have money or of culture, like, my mother would say, “No hagas eso, eso es para los gringos,” right? You know what I'm talking about. Or it could be the other way. “Don't do that, only Mexicans do that.” And I used to say, “No, es para todos. El que puede quiere y se hace.” It doesn't mean that it was for me. It doesn't mean that it was going to sustain. But I got to try it. And that's always been something that I have done. I don't think of myself lesser than, just because I'm different. It's been a lifelong of acceptance, but that gift of turning a negative into a positive—so now that I'm a full-grown woman, all those looks, all that—”Is that a man?” Or, “Oh, look at that face, but she's so fat!” Or, “Oh my God, what happened to her? She used to model.” All those things, only fortify me. That's my superpower. Every time there's something negative, I come out fighting and I bounce harder.

Q: Do you remember when you first started dressing in the way that you wanted to dress, maybe more masculine?

Esparza: Yes.

Q: Like, can you tell us about that time, what it felt like, and what you were shedding?

Esparza: I never dressed in pinks or florals. I've always dressed—I was a teenager wearing business suits. I loved art deco, you know, the 1940s clothing that was kind of almost androgynous. I learned the power of making money so I could buy my own clothes. At twelve, I wanted pants like the ones you're wearing, which have pleats, kind of baggy, tighter on the body, and the bottom, very reminiscent of 1940s men's clothing, also very reminiscent of the 1940s if you look at Cate Blanchett in *Aviator*, right, the way she was dressed. Ooh, Katharine Hepburn was queer. And that's the way she dressed outside of—you know, in real life. Wow, that's my dress. It's androgynous.

So I would look for clothing like that, and ask my mother, “Hey, can I have those platform shoes with those pants?” And she would say, “No.” “What if I pay for them?” “How are you going to pay for them? Ha ha ha ha, sure. Ha ha ha.” “All right, can I borrow two dollars? I'll put them on layaway.” “Are you going to pay me back?” “Yes, I am, I have the money at home.” Two dollars, put them on layaway. Then my ass on a bike would go make payments. I hustled. I hustled my brothers, can I clean up, because their job was to clean and get paid. So I took the boys' jobs to buy the boys' pants. And I walked out, I wore those pants, and they were almost see-through; real high-waisted, skinny belt, tucked in with a white shirt. I'm now a teenager, and I'm still wearing those pants. I bought a suit that cost me \$104 in 1976. It was on sale. Tailored, gorgeous. It was a tuxedo jacket with a skirt. I wore that outfit way into my lesbianism, even. I remember this clothing.

So selling food gave me money, money gave me the power of independence. I didn't have to ask. I had the permission if I bought it myself. So somehow, that informed all the way to who I am today. Slowly, especially after the divorce, I started buying, let's say, men's shirts, and men's shirts, right, the sexism—a men's shirt will look exactly like a woman's shirt, except it's a lot less money. Back then I could buy a man's dress shirt for seven bucks, you still can. Nice, beautiful quality. And then I would wear it gorgeously. But people like my mother, judgy people, would be, like, "Your buttons are on the wrong side. That's a man's shirt." I'm, like, "It's pink with little gray stripes, purple stripes. How do you know?" Oh, se abrocha, the way the buttons go, right?

Q: She didn't like it.

Esparza: She didn't like it. It drove her crazy.

Q: Did she ever—I mean, I guess she maybe never understood it, but it sounded like she accepted it toward the end of her life.

Esparza: Towards the end, yes. Even four years before she died, there was an incident where my grandmother had passed away, and people were coming. And of course, I was there cooking, I'm the one that was cooking and cleaning. My sister happens to be there, and my brother, the Jehovah's Witness. She brought my sister and brother out to introduce them to old time friends from way back, that came to give el pésame. And the wife's, "Silvia," like, "Silvia" is what they used to call me, "Silvia," when I was a kid, not to confuse me with the old lady, Silvana. But she

was Silvia. And my mother said, “No.” Now that would have been an opportunity to say she’s in the kitchen washing dishes, making lasagna for everybody. But I was wearing cutoff shorts, a t-shirt, my hair was short, a mess. I’m sure I was cleaning. My sister looked beautiful, heterosexual. My brother was probably wearing a suit.

So I came out, I remember I was drying my hands, and I said, “No, yo soy Silvia, ta-da!” But Silvia’s busy making lasagna, so if you want to stay for it, it’ll be ready in about an hour. Nos invito que se queden. My mother was embarrassed, but that’s the way I am. “Oh, really?” This is an opportunity for me—I speak for myself. I no longer expect others to advocate for me. I advocate for myself, and all the queer little kids, all the poor kids that had to grow up with weird religions that—or they were marginalized. I speak for the Mexicanos, the ones with the funny accent. I speak for the little dykes, for everybody. And that power, just like I have the power of my ancestors, I have the power of those communities that were, for whatever reason, chosen to be marginalized, to be discriminated, to be outcast. Fuck you if you think I’m an outcast, or you think I’m weird—you’re the one that’s weird. How boring to be so vanilla as you. How boring to be heterosexual. I kind of feel sorry for people because they’re not happy. Your sexuality does not define you. It doesn’t make you happy. As sad as homosexuals are, as sad heterosexuals are, except there’s more of them, I am not a bad person because of my sexuality. I’m not a thief that is out to take your jobs because of my nationality. I am also not out to screw you because I’m a capitalist. I’m a capitalist that doesn’t want to be a capitalist. I’m only capitalist, because that’s what you call a person who’s self-employed and makes money and employs others.

Q: Were there—I'm curious to sort of continue and go back to your upbringing, and some of the heteronormative expectations that you had. Were there derogatory terms that you heard, growing up about gay people and lesbians, were there messages?

Esparza: More derogatory than the freaking Bible, it doesn't get.

Q: Do you remember some of those phrases and terms?

Esparza: Absolutely. You know, Sodom and Gomorrah, you know, Jehovah's Witnesses love playacting, and they do demonstrations, and they do these skits during their assemblies and conferences. And they record them in Bethel, which is in New York. It used to be downtown, right, right near the site—in Brooklyn. Now they're out in the country somewhere. But they record them and they act them. Then the congregation will take those recordings and kind of act them out, but they're not the ones saying the words, it's a recording, so you're lip-syncing as a demonstration. And I clearly remember one, it was—we were probably at Dodger's Stadium, so it's international assembly, huge, huge assembly. And in Spanish, right? And there was a drama—they called them “dramas” about Sodom and Gomorrah. And when they start, the angels, right, where the gay men, the homosexuals were, like—the Bible talks—I can't even remember, but it talks about that the angels were accosted by men, because they were so beautiful, they wanted them. And I try not to remember scripture, but I remember that.

But what stayed with me was at that assembly, the audio, when they were acting, these guys were walking through like they were the angels, or they were God's people, and the background

was, “Ay, ¡qué guapos! Sí, ¡nos gustan!”—somebody was having fun back in Brooklyn at Bethel, probably some closeted little guy, acting with such a comical way of depicting a homosexual man a vulgar way. And everybody laughed, like, “Aha ha!” I am neither a joke nor lesser than you. I actually pay more taxes for years, because I wasn’t heterosexual. And the way I look at it is this way: I have a right to everything you do. If you don’t have a right to something, then I shouldn’t have a right to it, either. I want to be on equal playing field. I want the same opportunities you do, I’m talking about people in the United States. I want the same opportunities as you do, sir, and if you don’t give them to me, I’m going to take them. I’m going to smoke your cigars, I’m going to drink your fucking whiskey, I’m going to ride a Harley. And if I want a Ford F250, I’m going to ride a white man’s Ford. And if I want to put a Mexican flag, or an American flag, for that on the back, I will, too. You don’t get to tell me I’m lesser, or stay in my lane, yet you can come and take my culture, capitalize on it—tacos, burritos, poor man’s food, and you’re making millions off of it. Well, then I’m going to go and do the same thing. That’s my right. I’m American, you all. And I am a mexicana también. [*Unclear*] porque yo también cuento aquí. I count here and I count everywhere. No soy ni de aquí, ni de allá, not from here and not from there, I am de aquí y de allá. Yo y todos los demás. It’s just a change of attitude. It’s a comma, it’s a period. It’s just how you say things and how you believe things.

Q: I’m curious when, you know, because of your upbringing, and because your family, for a long time, and in many ways didn’t accept your sexuality and had a hard time with that part of your life, and just how you moved in the world—your gender presentation, how you dress, how you wear your hair, I’m curious, like, how—were there other gathering spaces where you were able to meet people in the LGBT community? You know, we talk a lot about chosen familia, and I’m

curious, who's been your chosen familia, especially through those years when you were really coming into yourself, and your sort of family of origin was not accepting, and you received all these messages, growing up about how sinful LGBT people were, and gay men, and all of that. So I'm curious, what were the spaces? And who is your chosen familia that sort of became—it was a harbor for you and kept you afloat during those really difficult years?

Esparza: If I was coming out today, I can go to any group and meet like-minded people. I can look upon Google and find a coffee house that's queer-oriented. If I live in a small town, I can get on the computer and find others like me. In my era, and the era before me, that was not available. Yes, there was things like these little books, but it was all geared towards men; what bars to go to, what alley to go to, whatever, if you wanted to be a man. There were books, but not for women. And the only guides that you could ever find would be to lesbian bars. The first time I stepped into a gay bar, after being an elder's daughter, being married, going to church, being a professional, I felt out of place. It wasn't the music, it wasn't the dancing, I loved that. In fact, I felt in place there. I felt out of place because I had never seen anything—I heard that drama audio from that assembly again. Ay, mira, that comical queerness—all of those things came before me that moment. And after that day when I left there, I had to—it felt like, I didn't belong here.

And the truth is, I'm not the bar kind of, let's go out, even in my twenties, kind of girl, I'm not. I'm a, believe it or not, I'm very conservative. Soy muchacha de casa, and I always have been. It was easy for me to be a muchacha de casa, because I am naturally that way. Si otra fuera man, I would have killed it. Sometimes I think, man, you could have killed it with the girls back then,

but I didn't. That's not what I was after. Part of me wanted that heterosexual, but with a woman normative, you know, a wife, a relationship, adopt some kids, her kids, my kids—whatever. I wanted that. I knew it back then. I wasn't going to find it at a bar. Very hard to do that. I wasn't going to go to MCC [Metropolitan Community Churches], the church that—those were your choices, go to gay church or go to a bar. I wasn't at a place where there was a community center, I wasn't at a place where there were coffee shops, where there were meeting places. If I wanted to go actually to a lesbian bar, I had to get in my car and drive two hours, minimum.

So things were different. I struggled. I found myself finding a community of drag queens and men, not women, men, that I felt at home with. Ostracized. One of them had been a Jehovah's Witness, and their family wanted nothing to do with them. Another one, the father was abusive and very Baptist, and wanted nothing to do with him. Another one just wanted to party with us. We created a group that—Thanksgiving, back then, we didn't believe in those things, but we still wanted to feel that warmth of, everybody's with their families, and we were alone.

So I started cooking meatloaf, whatever we had. We didn't have money, we were young. And we built community there, and we start staying out of bars, and, hey, let's have a barbecue, and let's throw a tardeada, you know, in the afternoon, and bring banda, or something. We were queer, we were creative, and it was good energy. But I had to go make that and find it. So I learned that you make your family, and I always have. And it's been hard on my family to know that I have very close friends, and that I easily make family other places, other than my family. You're given two families, your chosen, right? I try to blend both now, because I'm empowered by myself. I no longer have to think of what they're thinking. I don't care what they're thinking. I just—if you

just want to come to my house for a barbecue, come. And my queer friends are going to be there, and my artist friends, and so it's a blend. And it continues to be a blend. No matter where I go, that's always how I function.

Q: I'm curious, you make such a good point, because in the eighties, this is well before the internet was available, and you didn't really email, right, and Google wasn't Google. So it was a very different landscape back then, especially if you didn't go—there weren't many lesbian bars, and if you didn't go to those, how do you find community? It can be very difficult. And I'm curious, how did you meet these drag queens, drag kings, these gay men? Like, it sounds like you created, through food, other ways to gather, right?

Esparza: I did.

Q: So I'm curious to hear a little bit more about what those gatherings were like, and also how you were able to meet those gay men. Was it through the kitchens, through the restaurants? Or was it just—and where were you at that time? Were you in Phoenix at that time?

Esparza: No, no.

Q: This is what—you were in Cali?

Esparza: By the time I got—yes, I was in Cali. And by the time I got to Phoenix, I was good. But I went to the only gay bar in this little town called Bakersfield, California. San Joaquin Valley,

it's a special kind of breed of people there. We're sons of the earth there. Our people work the fields. My people fed the people who worked the fields, so I'm connected, since age six.

So I go to this bar after living in Florida, thinking my shit didn't stink. And I'm going back to the San Joaquin Valley; I want to learn my dad's crafts. That's where I need to be. Like, I felt empty. Didn't matter how much money I made at the bank, I felt empty. So I walked down to this bar called The Cellar, it had been there over a hundred years, so it's a historic gay bar, one of the oldest in California at the time. And it's literally in a cellar, so you hit this, like, nasty sewage smell from the building above. Then once you get past that, it's this dark, small bar with a dance floor. I'm by myself, I'm sitting there, and a woman comes up to me and kisses my hand.

There's all—you, I didn't know how small a town, because everybody knows each other, and you. And I stand out like a sore thumb, looking like I just came from Miami, and my big hair, and everything. And I felt like, I don't belong here. So after an hour or so, a drink, I went up the stairs, got past that stink. And coming in was a man. And he goes, "Whoo! Look at you! Girl, where are you from?" And then we start talking. He goes, "Let me have your number. You're not from here. You need a friend, or you're going to get sucked up by these dykes." That's how he said it. He goes, "This is the San Joaquin Valley, there's a lot of drugs here. Let me be your fairy godmother." Eddie Hinman [*phonetic*].

So Eddie worked at a department store that happened to be making all that smell for the bar below, he worked upstairs, what was it called, Jordan's, I think. The fancy department store in the town, in the city. So Eddie is the one that took me under his wing, introduced me to other people. We went—him and his boyfriend, we would go antiquing, and I would start cooking.

And it's through them that I created a friendship in a community at home. We go dancing, but we go dancing as a group, not as, I'm at a bar looking to meet people. That's not my style. I always thought that people who meet at bars, that relationship is usually not sustainable. That was my observation. So I didn't want to meet, like, relationships, or a woman or dating from a bar.

Q: Mm-hmm.

Esparza: I just knew that about myself. But there was absolutely zero, outside of a back page in a magazine want ads, or something, on how to meet other gay people, or the future love of your life, right? That was not going to happen for me.

So because of that, I struggled. And I had a very unsuccessful love life.

Q: It was hard to meet women. It was hard to meet up—

Esparza: Like-minded women.

Q: Yes.

Esparza: So you had to settle. And I'm being very candid about it, you had to settle. Like mind is very important. You know, even those silly scriptures talk about being evil and guilt, right? Like-minded. I am married now, I'm very happy. But we're like-minded. We're not identical, thank

God. I couldn't be with me. But we're like-minded. And that's what's important. Our values, our thinking, our work. I'm not a chef. "Chef" is what I use as a platform for social work, for the work that I do from the heart. My heart work comes out—it manifests as social work, because food is love. It comes from a place of love. We're daughters of the corn, somos las hijas del maíz, it's our responsibility as people who carry that in their blood to feed people.

One thing I notice about Mexicans, you walk into my house, people you don't know, and right away, "¿Tienes hambre, mi hijo? ¿Tienes hambre?" Any Latino, basically, you know, is going to say, "Are you hungry?" "¿Tienes hambre?" Sacan los frijolitos, even if it's beans and tortillas, but you're going to eat something, you know? If you're from the Caribbean, you're going to have mofongo, you know? Or habichuelas or yuca, right? Depending on whatever the region. But you're going to eat something. And that's just part of my DNA. So food has always been part of our DNA and our responsibility.

Q: Hmm. And a way to gather.

Esparza: And be happy. No hay nada como comer. Y comer sabroso.

Q: Siempre. You brought up how food is a pathway for your activism, and just your—you also are a lover of art. So I was curious, since art and activism is at the core of your work at Barrio Café, and just in general. But just especially at Barrio Café, the design, the murals that you have on the sides of the buildings, can you talk a little bit more about the role that those two things play in your work, and how you—at Barrio Café, and in general?

Esparza: Barrio Café was established in 2002, and part of our little tagline was, art. We had art, we never charge, we wanted to support artists. And a guy named Ed Moses came as the first Chicano artist. And he brought Caper, or Pablo Luna. And from there, they kept bringing each other, as much as people say, you know, that in our culture they say Mexicans are like crabs in a bucket; just when you think you got out, they pull you back down. I beg to differ. I've seen it in action. I've seen that Mexicanese helping each other. Right now there's a lot of talk about George Lopez saying, "You look out for yourself," and basically screw everybody else. Well, he's got that crabs in a bucket mentality, right? I don't, because I've been the out man out. So if I've got something, I want everybody—come on, gang, I've got you over here. Forget that.

So we wanted to support artists. Then those artists brought us more Chicano artists, which is—I wanted it to match my food.

Q: And for those who can't see, who'll hopefully have some pictures of those murals, but for those who can't, or just listening to this, what are some of the work that the artists did at the space, that you feel really excited about?

Esparza: Well, we were displaying their art, and it was very different than artists from Mexico. Artists from Mexico will have their culture, beautiful—the food or a small town, or a man by the beach with baskets, or a guy carrying balloons, or a señora and a molcajete grinding corn. An artist, a Chicano artist, will have a lowrider with a Day of the Dead calaca coming out of it, holding maybe a joint tatted up with a city scene behind them with graffiti and some rucas in the

corner—that's a difference, a big difference. Somebody in Mexico cannot paint like that, because they cannot identify with that. If they pay anything, Día de los Muertos is usually around Día de los Muertos, whereas Día de los Muertos is part of our culture 365 days of the year.

So that Chicano art, the cars—I love cars, I'm a lowrider, so right away, more cars. And all the artists who do cars started coming. In fact, I have a collection from every artist, there's a handful of them. Their first lowrider that showed at the Barrio, I bought. Not only that I give them free space, but I bought their art as well. Sometimes a lot of it. For twenty years, we've been doing that, we never charge commission. So happy Barrio Café, everybody loves Barrio Café.

Everybody's rushing to Barrio Café. Two thousand and ten happens. There was a little nasty law that came out of Arizona called SB 1070, State Built 1070. For short, it was, Show Us Your Papers law. That comes out. I had commissioned a cultural painting on this long wall behind my restaurant. I bought the property behind it, which is where I live now. Actually, I live here now, but long story. But I bought the house behind it, it turned into my office, and I wanted that wall to paint a mural. So it was a cultura wall, it had lucha libre, el loto, la Virgen de Guadalupe. It took him a year to paint it. He's finishing the summer of SB 1070, 2010, when a guy rolls up in a pickup, shows him a gun and says, "We don't like your kind here painting this on our streets." The artist moved to New Mexico. But when he was telling me this, "I'm moving to New Mexico because of this," literally because of this, I said, "Uh!" And I looked around, and I said, "That building's mine, that building's mine. And I'm painting more fucking murals!"

So out of protest, and out of that guy showing us the gun, remember the negative turning into a positive? I lose a business. I'm, like, chinga tu madre, qué cabrón, I'm going to show you. And I

come out with a better business. This guy shows us a gun and says, “I don’t want your kind painting this bullshit on our walls. This is America.” I’m going to paint more murals. Cultura. Pride. Not for him, not to rub him the wrong way, but instead for those kids that have to listen to that, for those Mexicano kids that are walking through my neighborhood all the time to go to the school that’s around the corner. So those kids came and helped. I did a community mural, I announced it through social media, who wants to help? Artists showed up, community showed up. And to this day, I still have bonds with people who showed up during that time. I have given employment. I have trained and given careers. And it’s not I-I-I, it’s we-we-we did it together, because I had a platform. Somebody asked me in the newspaper, what do you think of this law? And I said, “I think it’s nasty and racist.” And it alienated me from half of the city, and the other half became enamored, supportive, encariñados. To this day, I still get that support, and I don’t back down from that. You do you, and I’ll do me, and this is what I do. You know?

Q: What did that time, I guess, when you reflect back on it, what do you—I guess, did it change you in any meaningful way?

Esparza: Yes. It just fortified who I was already, the thinking. I lost a relationship, basically, over it, my political activism and marchas—and it was too much. It was much. It was too much for the whole city. But because it was too much, something needed to be done.

Q: Right.

Esparza: You know? I got death threats—it became something pretty big.

Q: Because you were a public figure standing out against SB 1070.

Esparza: You know, it came out of the front page of the paper, “Barrio Café Chef Speaks Out Against SB 1070.” I had people from Tennessee with those thick accents calling me and threatening me for death, and we’re going to boycott. And honestly, that doesn’t scare me. That gives me more fuel, so I start painting more murals. And I continue to this day to paint more murals. And the city now is filled with murals. And they’re not all cultura, but they’re following suit. There’s a lot of butterflies and a lot of cactus, and a lot, almost too much, hummingbirds. But some of those hummingbirds are indigenous. Some are Mexicanos, con ese toquecito. So I’m down with that. But the city is, even right now, it’s Super Bowl. And there are Super Bowl murals painted for the first time in the history of the NFL by a native, indigenous Mexicana, that’s making history.

Q: Yes. Yes. In a previous interview, and you mentioned it earlier today, you’re a lover of lowriders. And in a previous interview, you said, “Lowriders are a pure art.” You’re also known for your amazing collection of vintage cars. I was just curious where your love of lowriders comes from, if you could tell us more about seeing lowrider culture as pure art.

Esparza: La carcacha. La carcacha is an old jalopy, an old car. Immigrants come to this country, they’re not going to drive a car of the current year. They’re going to drive a car from minimum, ten years. My father got here in the late fifties, so he drove a ten-year-old car. And his car was a 1950 Chevrolet four-door Styleline coupe. I have a show car that is a 1950 two-door Chevrolet

Styleline coupe that sits on the rockers, doesn't it—you can't put a dime under it. You know, and again, if I could do a car, somebody told me, if you're going to run with the big dogs, you'll be pissing like a puppy, and that means, I take that in everything I do. I'm going to see what the lowriders are all about.

But so my father buys this car, I fall in love with it. He sells it, I cry. We never since then had a car without rims, or slightly lowered. My brothers start—if you think about the era, the cruising down Main Street, that American Graffiti, hot-rodding, that was that fifties, sixties. Well, out of that, in our immigrant fathers' cars, we started putting rims on them, Cragars. We start fixing our dads' jalopies that are now ours. And what have you got? You got these bombs, you have these cars that are from the fifties. And that's how it started. And for us, that was the case. My father, who had never had a car in Mexico, became addicted to cars. He was changing cars every two years. He hit the jackpot, el panadero in a farming community, where he was making money. So that car influence stayed with us. It became part of us. Then my brothers, with that running—look at this, this is so beautiful. My wife has brought us tea, it's chilly outside. The sun looks like it wants to set. We're looking at the Pacific Ocean here, in Rosarito Baja, California, and it's the best of all worlds. It's not a patriarch, heterosexual, you know, I expect that. It's love.

Q: Yes.

Esparza: It's relationship.

Q: Sending us the best.

Esparza: But going back to those cars, by the time I got a license, the first thing I did was buy a car, put rims on it, lower it. Lowriding was—my brothers hot-rodged. They hot-rodged their cards. I lowride my cars, because by the time it hit my town, lowriders were starting. I got a license in 1976. I used to go cruising every Friday and Saturday night. To this day, if I could cruise—as often as I can, I go cruising.

Q: What is it for people that don't know about cruising? What is the—it's also interesting, cruising is also—there's a gay connotation—

Esparza: I was going to say, well, it's not gay. Well, it could be.

Q: Not that kind of cruising.

Esparza: Ooh, you could go cruising like that in a lowrider.

Q: Hey.

Esparza: Maybe will. No, cruising is going in a car, no matter what it is. There's an old movie called *American Graffiti* that is the personification of American culture in California in the 1950s, is kids acting up, going down Main Street back and forth, trying to hook up with each other, drinking some beers, listening to rock and roll and having drag races, and all that.

Q: So to be seen.

Esparza: Well, out of that comes—by the time—lowriding had been going on for years. We can go way back to the Zoot Suit riots, they're in World War II, where American servicemen beat the living daylights out of Mexicans who were wearing Zoot Suits, and some African Americans, in LA. Then the cops beat the living daylights out of them, and then incarcerated—did they incarcerate the servicemen? No. They incarcerated the people of color for the way they dressed.

So out of that, the way we dressed, or the way we show our cars, the way I show my culture through my tattoos, the way I show my queerness through the way I look, that takes a lot of—excuse the word—balls, especially as a business person with a high visibility. But I'll be damned if I'm going to live my life on my knees. Emiliano Zapata, one of Mexican revolutionary leaders during the 1910s said, "I'd rather die on my feet than live my life on my knees." It's tatted up on my back. I have that as a reminder. My motto, my credo, my talisman—that's how I live my life. I'd rather be true to myself and be happy than live my life on my knees, like everybody else. That sums it up. My mother would say, "Why do you go camping at the beach for the weekend and come back two weeks later?" I'm, like, "Because the beach is beautiful and the sunsets are amazing, and I make carnita asada, and I have fun. And I'm with your god, even. And she would say, "Yes, but you should be working and save your money so you can buy a house." And I'm, like, "That worked for you. I'll buy one—I'll buy many houses, but right now, let me enjoy my life." She would say, "Come to church. Don't you want to live in the paradise on earth forever?" And I would say, "I find it very hard to desire a paradise and living forever when I can't even enjoy the life I have now."

So for me, it's always to preserve, live, be true to myself, preserve my independence, my identity. As it turns out, which I call the "right way of living," respecting you and your gods and your belief system, respecting you and your hate towards me, respecting you in your—¿cómo se dice?—judgement of me, it puts me in a better place than you. And I don't care about you. I care about me. And I don't mean it in a selfish way, I mean it in a, I have to take—you know, when you're on an airplane, what do they tell you? Put the mask on yourself first before you can help the others. Well, I had to go find my oxygen mask. I've had to go put it on myself. Then I can go help others. And as it turns out, that the right way of living, doing the right thing for myself, that little formula, has served me well. I have people who write to me and tell me, "Thank you for being out about your sexuality." "Thank you for standing up for us Mexicanos." "Thank you for being out about dyslexia." "Thank you for speaking out about your disease, sarcoidosis." In fact, today, somebody wrote to me, I couldn't read it because I start to cry, I'll read it later when I can respond on a computer and not my phone, but a woman wrote to me and said, "My son admired you and your courage and your battle with sarcoidosis. He passed away." So it's a very, very long mail that I will write back to, when I have time to really embrace it. But things like that, those thank yous only feed me to continue to do what I do. I don't belong to an organization, I don't belong to—I was going to do a nonprofit for the art, for example, for the murals. Calle 16. When I saw how the people who were helping me and wanted to set up a board, I saw greed, self-serving, vendidos, sellouts. I saw that, I smelled it, and I put the brakes on, and I walked away. I said, "You guys can do it if you want, go ahead. I'm walking away." And I did. And I continue to do Calle 16, pero a mi manera. You know, without having to answer to anybody. I

don't have to run it through a board, I just talk to the artist and say, "Hey, do you want to paint a mural? I've got X-amount of dollars for you, and I'll buy the paints. And here's the wall."

Q: I want to go back to something that you said, that I have this image of you cruising in these lowriders, and, like, you also are part of a—

Esparza: It's a man's world.

Q: —a car club.

Esparza: It's a man's world, though.

Q: Right. So I'm curious to hear more about—I mean, the looks that you might have gotten, the comments, like, how—has it been difficult to be a woman, to be a Chicana, to be a lesbiana in this culture, you know, in this scene? What has that been like for you? And also, I'd love to hear what you love about lowriders.

Esparza: Oh man, it feels so good to be in a car.

Q: What does that feel like?

Esparza: Cars are just something special. If you're listening to my voice and you love cars, you can identify with what I'm talking about. Even when you get in your car, your favorite baby,

every car has a different way. And you know, you get in there, and you have to pump it a little bit and hold it down. Some cars you have to hold down the pedal, and then, rehhrrr. Rehhrrr. You know it's going to take ten of those before it starts, but you've got to be careful, it's a fine line before flooding it. Your Volkswagen, perhaps, you have to pump it twice and no more. So there's an understanding, of knowing. And then they react to you. They give you pleasure. They take you places. Heads turn. Heads always turn. I feel like I'm in a parade when I'm driving my car. It takes me out of the busy, out of the everyday. It takes me out of—I was going to say driving my daily, but even my daily I absolutely love.

But when I was cruising on Main Street with my older brothers as a kid, and then I got to be behind the car, first thing I did was put rims, pinstripe on the car. Lowered it a little. And guys would look at me. They would look at my car, and then they would go, "Oh, it's a girl."

Q: Mm-hmm. What were you driving?

Esparza: Well, I was driving a 1972 Monte Carlo, metal flaked out with flared-out body, 50TA B. F. Goodrich tires with Cragers. And it had a totally Edelbrocks and—

[END OF FILE B]

[BEGIN OF FILE C]

Esparza: —engine, you know, everything was modified. It had a sound like—it made guys jealous.

So then I took that car and I got a 1978—I work, I make payments, I pay the insurance. Nobody gave me nothing. But I bought a 1978 Firebird Formula, with an engine that would just almost flip a wheelie on that car. It was fabulous. I lowered it, put pinstripes, put fifty TAs on there, and it just had a look. Then I bought a 1978, the last year you could buy this car in the United States, convertible Volkswagen, when you couldn't get gas every day. And I lowered it and put a thirteen-inch rims on it, Cragers. And I cruised with—well, since '76, I was cruising with all three cars with the new club, fresh club, called Carnales Unidos. San Joaquin Valley Club, car club's still there, it's one of the oldest. The thing is, I could cruise with you, you could show my car as one of, like, ooh, check out her car. Yes, it's with us. But I couldn't wear the t-shirt. I was the one taking the pictures of the men, the boys, the guys.

So at one point, my mother became ill and my grandmother became ill, and I had to take care of them, so it took me out of the cruising game. And I started focusing on the responsibilities at home at sixteen. So I stopped desiring by seventeen to be in the lowrider club, because I knew that they would never allow a girl, as much as they loved me, they would never allow me to be on the boys' team. Fast forward to, I don't know, thirteen years ago, I buy Baby Girl. Baby Girl's my car, my 1950. And there was a chapter of a club that was, mmm, twenty-five years at the time, and they needed members. So my brother said, "Hey, I know this club," and he had a pickup. So I go over there, and it was, like, oh man, that was hardcore stuff, I mean, tatted up

faces, just hardcore. Hardcore, I mean, like, I bet you ran in a gang a long time ago, kind of hardcore. And I went right in there.

And they said, “What’s your name?” I have a nickname, by the way, that only my nieces and nephews call me, Coco, because I have a thyroid operation, and my nephew who only spoke Spanish, saw the scar and went, “Mommy, tiene coco.” And that became my name, “Coco” [*phonetic*]. If he was an English speaker, I would have been Boo Boo. So these vatos are like, “What’s your name, esa?” I’m, like, “Coco.” I did it for a couple of things; I wanted a lowrider name, and I wanted to see grown-ass, vato, hardcore, tatted dudes call me “Coco.” Now—

”Coco! What’s up, Coco? How you doing, girl? Coco’s in the house!” [*Laughter*] You know, where I wasn’t allowed to be in the club, I am allowed to be vice president. Where I wasn’t allowed to wear a t-shirt, I got some of the best looking outfits in that lowrider world. I got Pendletons, I wear men’s clothing. I’ll wear women’s clothing. I’ll wear whatever the hell I want. And I wear it with pride.

And there’s an expectation, I don’t know if it’s because I’m queer, or because I don’t care, but there’s a look that lowrider women have, you could Google it. “Lowrider women,” there’s a look, very maquillada, lots of makeup, the hair done all up, you know, sassy, sexy, tight shirts with their little Viejitos [*phonetic*], or whatever club their man’s on. If they belong to the club, then they dress it up, they’ve got the little hats—I don’t match any of that. I’ll show up with cowboy boots, or long-assed socks and shorts. I am, like, that *Sesame Street* thing, where one of these things don’t belong together—I’m the one. But I am there, I’m embraced, and I’m loved. I didn’t have to modify or pretend to be anybody else, other than who I am. And my cars are legit,

and they're respected. In fact, they win awards at shows. Because again, it's just like the white guys with their golf and their cigars and whiskey. It's the Mexican guys with the lowriding and the cars. It's not for you, it's for all of us. And if I have to go in there and stink up the place a little bit, then I'll do it.

Q: Do you ever think about what it would feel like to not fight?

Esparza: I'm starting to not fight as much as I used to, but, you know, I got married to a woman once and I had to pay alimony, so I know how that feels, you know, like the heterosexual world.

Q: I guess I just mean, like, what that might feel like, and not to not fight when you should be fighting, right? Not to just lay down. But I wonder if sometimes we get so used to being one way, so used to showing up one way that we sometimes don't know what any other way might feel like. And I'm curious, especially now, you're very young, but as you're getting older, if you feel any kinds of shifts around rest, around—

Esparza: No. No. No, and no. [*Laughter*] And if I did, I would become blasé and boring, and, you know, the fight is what feeds me.

Q: Yes.

Esparza: That adversary, the, "Oh, what do you mean the Supreme Court might take away my rights? Oh, yes, I love a good fight. Bring it!" I always—in the nineties, I saw all these high

school girls holding hands at a coffee shop, Phoenix's first "gay" coffee shop where the people hung out. And I see these young girls holding hands, and I say, "Excuse me, you guys are in high school?" They're, like, "Yes." I go, "Oh, and do you hold hands in high school?" "Yes." "And the people say shit to you?" They're, like, "Yes." I go, "You're pioneers. You are doing some bad-ass work, girls. Keep holding hands. In fact, give each other a kiss at every period. Like everybody else. Because if they can kiss in public, you can kiss in public. If they can hold hands in public, why do you have to hold who you love's hands in secret?" So the fight will always be there. It hasn't stopped. But the fight has shifted. The fight has shifted. And until we become Tehuantepec where a muxe could be instead of included, celebrated, held at a higher standard, as a queer person, I should be celebrated. I'm not like everybody else. I have multiple talents. I have abilities that maybe other heterosexuals don't. I should be celebrated just for my queerness alone, for being different, instead of oppressed.

Q: Right.

Esparza: So until we can be celebrated and stop fighting, the fight will never stop. I personally like a good challenge, soy peleonera. Pero de las buenas. Much like Juana de Cobos, my aunt. Pero de las buenas.

Q: You have so much—I mean it's really remarkable how much—you have such a young spirit, you really do, and also an old spirit, because you're connected to those ancestors, and they're with you, and I feel that. And you have so much energy. And to sort of dig a little bit deeper, and as something that you've pointed to throughout our conversation, and something that I've been

asking the participants, as someone who's experienced, feeling shame, and feeling shame about my sexuality, I don't know a queer person who hasn't been hidden, or hidden themselves by a lover or a job, or relatives, and especially within the Latino/Latinx community, there's the strong religious influences, Catholicism that adds to that shame. And so my question is, as you sort of reflect back on the entire trajectory of your life, like, what has been the role—have you felt hidden—like, in what ways have you felt hidden, and what had been the role of shame, and what role has shame played in your life? I know now, you don't have any shame for who you are, nor do you have reason to. But I'm curious, those moments where you felt hidden, those moments where you felt that you had to hide a part of who you are?

Esparza: No. No, because I didn't know who I was. And I was taught that, for example, in biblical times that once you know the truth, you cannot unknow it. So basically they were referring to, once you know God.

Q: Right.

Esparza: Then you're held responsible for knowing God's laws. Well, once you know who you are, then you're held responsible for honoring who you are. So I've never had shame. What I've had is to watch what I say, only to my mother. She was the only one that was like, "Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente," sending me a message to keep your life separate from me. That's fine, Mom, I've never had sex with anybody in front of you before, so I'm not going to start now, okay? Don't worry about it. But I do deserve the same happiness that you wish upon my brothers and sisters. I do deserve the same support that you show them. And if you can't give me

that, I will find it somewhere else, which I did. Then you begrudge me that I'm not here. That you have expectations for me.

So I never felt shame. Shame on you, more than anything else. Shame on society. Shame on the little white ladies at the Cracker Barrel who get scared when they see me going into the woman's bathroom. But not shame on me.

Q: Yes.

Esparza: Shame on me if I shun who I am, if I hurt myself and put myself in a place to be depressed, to commit suicide, to overeat, to drug up, to overdrink, to find something to give me that satisfaction that I could easily—life is hard, my friend.

Q: Yes.

Esparza: Life—those of you listening to my voice, you know life is hard. If you haven't found out from experience, you're going to find out. Enough. Life is hard enough. Can you imagine, you're told that the color of your skin, no matter what the color is, so imagine whatever color you are that that color doesn't deserve the same rights as the other color? Imagine being told that your choices don't deserve the same rights. Put yourself in other shoes, and maybe we can start to have a discourse, or at least understand each other.

Q: Yes. I'm curious—I only have a few more questions. But I'm curious, Serena's come in here and has—it has been such a joy to meet her, and to see both of you. You just got married in December, a couple of months ago. What has falling in love at an older age meant to you? Because some people lose hope. You have a different story. I was wondering if you could share that with us.

Esparza: I've had women reach out to me, and offered proposals. And I've always been, no, I don't do that. I'm saving myself for that love of my life, because at one point, I stopped, and I'd rather be alone. Relationships do give you a lot, but they also take a lot. And I felt myself that at some point, I wasn't getting anything out of relationships that had—it's like being in a job that you know you don't want forever. You're just buying time. That doesn't feel well.

So instead, I spent my years, my time, working on myself, feeding my soul, even more. I was already complete, you know, I wasn't incomplete; I mean, nobody completes me. I complete myself as complete. And I will never be complete, it's a work in progress. But I did things like, go against my culture by going to therapy, working things out, understanding even more. I did things like traveling alone, a lot. That little girl on the bike in Merced, California, with those ten dollars in her pocket continued into my fifties and sixties, traveling all over, alone. And when you travel alone, you meet more people. You have more experiences. I don't know why.

After the very end of all that, I'm now sixty-one, I'm, like, okay, what is the problem here? I know that I'm not going to love—I know I'm going to love with complete abandonment. I know that I'm going to love complete, meaning, I am complete, and I am going to love somebody

complete. And that's exactly who I met, somebody who's complete. Somebody who is complete, and yet continues to grow, continues to seek. Somebody who shares many things with me and still is different enough that we can keep each other going. Serena is, in fact, a gift, one of those gifts of right living, of making the right decisions, and being patient, and never giving up on love. I don't give up on love, I'm a romantic. Not everybody is meant to have this, but I know it's for me. And I had to stay steadfast. Most women my age are, like, "Oh, screw relationships, they're all the same, nah nah nah nah nah"—I have a family member that feels that way. And as long as you're thinking that way, you will never find a relationship. You're not looking, but that person will never find you. You'll never make that union. I, on the other hand, said, oh, kind of, oh, that sucks for you, but personally, I will remain in faith and in hope and in full belief that I need to take care of myself so I can be the right person for the right person. If I'm broken, I'm going to get nothing but broken people.

Q: Yes.

Esparza: You know? And I'm not here to fix anybody, or somebody to fix me.

Q: What have you learned about love, in your relationship with Serena?

Esparza: Like, food, sabor, el saborcito, te lo saboreas, you savor it, a delight in food, in your palate, it's the same thing in your being and your soul and your knowing that you're doing it with the right person. We've never fought. People ask us, "Have you had that big fight yet?" And we're, like, "No. We've never fought." We don't disagree. When there's been something, you

know, and I'm usually the one with the big mouth, she has such a loving way of expressing herself, that it causes no—you know. And I'm, like, "Oh, you're right, okay." Likewise, you know, I still have to fight that colonial heterosexual mentality of, your role, my role, right?

Q: Really?

Esparza: Yes. Because it's still back there somewhere.

Q: In what ways?

Esparza: Remote ways like, it's my nature, but I always want to take care of her. She's a grown-up woman, she can take care of herself. But I always want to, like—I'm not her husband. I'm not her man. I'm not her daddy, I'm not her mommy. But yet I want to take care of her, one way or another. So I've had to—it's just a shift, again, it's how you say things, or how you feel things is, I want to take care of her because I love her, and it's reciprocal. I mean, I'm sitting here looking at hot tea and cookies and candy, and a little fresh fruit that she brought up. She's in her office, I will take her the same thing.

Q: Yes.

Esparza: We think about each other. I'm not a person that has ever thought of, I make decisions and then I let people know. For the first time in my life, I'm saying, "Let me check with Serena and see if that's okay with her." That's something new for me.

Q: How does it—

Esparza: Normally is, I made this appointment, I'm going to do this. You know, but I love her so much that I don't want her to not be part of my life and what I'm doing. Listen, not only am I sixty-two years old, people are starting to drop off like flies everywhere at this age. But most importantly, I have a disease that won't give me that elderly life. So the life that I have has to be concentrated, and it has to be complete. Every single day there's a sunset to be enjoyed. If you miss it, it's on you. I make it a point to try to stop, acknowledge the sunset that's different every si—I've never seen one that looks the same. Never. Some are—some you say, oh, it's not going to be pretty. Then all of a sudden it's pink, orange, purple, yellow, red. You're, like, where did that come from? So you have to stop, take that moment to enjoy the things that are for you.

Q: On that note, you're going to be an ancestor for people one day. And I know this is a big question, but I wanted to ask, how do you want to be remembered? Because a legacy can still live.

Esparza: Mmm. [*Laughs*] You know, life is legacy work, for you, myself, anybody listening to me—your life is legacy work. You are given a life. Some will be forgotten, some will be remembered. Some are remembered to this day, and we're taught about it in books that shouldn't be remembered. Christopher Columbus, my ancestor, and some that should have been remembered are not. So how do I want to be remembered? I don't know, I'm busy trying to figure out how to live life, and be true to myself and those around me. If you don't help others, if

you don't think of others before you think of yourself, then you're a sellout, you're a vendido, you're selfish, you're self-serving, and you're going to have that life. You might have money because of it—good for you. But you're going to sacrifice a lot. Soul searching is what comes to mind. Soul searching.

Q: And you've done a lot of that.

Esparza: El alma.

Q: And you've done a lot of that. I want to—because your tattoos are so stunning, we didn't really talk too much about that. For people listening, Silvana is tatted up, and this beautiful artwork, I notice you have the words “Amor” on your knuckles.

Esparza: Amor on my knuckles. Sí se puede on my arm. La hija del panadero, an homage to my nephew, who was murdered. La reina del barrio por vida—these messages and many more, la Virgen de Guadalupe, comida chingona, the Zapata saying, I have a Quetzalcoatl [*phonetic*] with corn on it in the back. My whole leg is in color. This is Chicano art, it's called “black and gray.” And on my leg, it's colorful. And they're all from Mexico, and indigenous of Mexico, and food-centric. And it was early nineties when I started getting tattoos, but I kept them hidden because my mother was still alive. You know, a good little Mexicana, you know? I don't want mommy being all, “¿Qué es eso? ¡Dios mío! Alma de dios.” So when she passed away, I got a huge Calavera with a chef's hat, it became the logo of Barrio Café. And it's just a form of expression. I've been stopped by police, and, “Let me see all those tattoos!” Like, first of all, I'm a woman,

but okay, let me show you my tattoos. This one says, “Sí, se puede,” like, “Yes we can.” I believe that we can. And when I forget, I look at my tattoo and I’m reminded that, yes, we can. This one says fe, that’s faith. Not faith in religion or man, or any of that, but faith in the belief system of the unity of love, the unity of you and I being together and working hard. We can achieve something. The—when darkness occurs, the belief that light will come. So it’s a reminder that you do have to have faith, the word “faith,” for me, does not mean the same thing that it does in a religious meaning.

Q: What does it mean to you?

Esparza: It means that I believe. I believe that that sunset’s going to happen, whether I can see it or not. And I believe I have faith in myself. I have faith in that inner god. I believe that there’s a god that lives within, that it has been with me even when I didn’t know it. It’s not a religious god, but it’s a spirituality. That’s how it manifests. And that spirituality is serving my fellow man. I’m a preacher’s daughter. We were trained to go preaching door to door on Saturday mornings. Then on Wednesday afternoon, we went back to the same migrant camps that we had been preaching to sell them bread, to watch them not have the money to pay for the bread, and bring out crates of peaches or tomatoes and barter with my father. Those are the people, the señoras, the ancestral cooks, the people that pick our fruits—those are the people that pull my heartstrings. Not my customers, let the people that can afford my food, or an expensive margarita—you are privileged, do you understand me? You are privileged to have a byproduct of those people sharing with me, and I mean those people with such love, las señoras ancestrales, la gente que andaba outside of their homeland, missing their homes, leaving their children to come

pick our freaking tomatoes in the blistering sun in the San Joaquin Valley so you can look down at them? No. Those are the people that I cook for. I cook because of them. And that's what drives me. That's where I have faith in. That's part of the faith.

Q: Last night you were playing some records, and before we started this interview you were playing some records. And I've been asking each participant, what are the songs that they're loving? What is the music of their soul? What records do they love, or what kinds of music do they love to listen to, because so much of our work is just sonic, and so much of your work is embodied, and I'm curious as a lover of music, you have instruments all over the house, what kinds of music do you love to listen to?

Esparza: Anything that comes out of the heart. But for me, it's a cultural thing. My go-to is always a bolero.

Q: Why do you love a bolero? I love a bolero, too.

Esparza: Oh, I love a bolero! It's the music of my youth. It's the music that was always on. I believe that my parents were listening to a bolero in the back of the bakery when they made me. And it's a music that is of love and romance. It's during an era where a bolero was so new and so popular, that it translated into English. Frenesí. There's many songs that you had Frank Sinatra singing, they were written in Spanish and made popular in Spanish and then translated into English. In fact, I'll take it a step further—that era, which is the golden era of Mexico, and Mexico was the hub, it was the Hollywood of the Americas. The music that came out of it, it

wasn't just Mexican, it was out of Mexico. But it was Venezuelan performers, Cuban performers. People from Colombia, going through Mexico, coming out of Mexico.

Q: Like Chavela.

Esparza: Like Chavela Vargas would be one of them.

Q: Yes.

Esparza: And then the movies, la época del cine de oro. Did you know that American Hollywood came to Mexico to learn how to make the melodrama? Because we're novela all the way, baby!

[*Laughter*] ¡Dramáticas!

Q: Si. What was that record that you were playing—

Esparza: That is from the 1940s, María Luisa Landín. And she sings boleros, and she throws a little Chan Chan in there, so have a little bit of Afro-Cuban background, pero bien mexicano, you know?

Q: It's beautiful. Me encanta. My last question is, what are the questions that you wish people would ask you? Is there anything that you'd like to share that maybe you haven't yet, before we sort of transition and close this part of the interview?

Esparza: No, I think you covered a lot of things that normally I'm not asked, because they never ask me about my queerness. I'm usually asked about my politics. I've been very involved with politics in the sense that I don't want to be a politician, but I want to hold my politicians accountable.

Q: Yes.

Esparza: I don't want them to forget us, the people that I've been talking about. So those are the one thing that I usually get asked, I don't ever get asked about being queer or being marginalized—none of that. It's assumed that I just have a strong voice. But I only have a strong voice because I was told that I'm not supposed to. It's kind of, shut up and know your place.

Q: Clearly backfired on you? [*Laughter*] Did you have any queer, like—something I'm wondering about, did you have any queer, Latina influences, mentors, writers, figures? Were there people that have come along in your life, people that you look up to now that maybe you didn't know about when you were younger? I mean, I'm thinking so much about—this project is really about trying to uplift our queer Latina lineage.

Esparza: Yes, that's the one thing, even as a chef, when I was looking for representation, I found none. I found Rick Bayless. So as queer, I was not going to find any whatsoever. At least that were out. Juan Gabriel, but even him, he didn't come out. He just said, “Lo que se ve, no se pregunta,” right?

Q: That's right. That's right.

Esparza: "What you see, you don't ask."

Q: Right.

Esparza: But no, you do ask, and you do speak. And you just say, "Yes, why? Does it bother you?"

Q: Did you long for that? For those connections to people who look like you, talk like you?

Esparza: Mmm, yes, absolutely. I mean, I remember *Chico and the Man*, Freddie Prinze. I was just a little snot-nose, but I remember that. It meant the world—we had to go to church, like, all these days during the week, but when they would change the day so I could go home and watch *Chico and the Man*, because back then, there was no repeats, right? You watched—if you didn't catch it, you didn't catch it.

Q: Right.

Esparza: Because he represented me. He was Puerto Rican. He had nothing to do with mi cultura mexicana. But he was throwing some, like, accents, and he was representing some people who speak Spanish, brown people—now I know better. I have a language for that. He represents the colonized people of mestizaje. He represents the marginalized people who live in the country,

where you're not supposed to act that way. I was empowered by his bell bottoms and his long sideburns, and his big hair and his mustache. I was empowered by the way he talked. I was empowered by his sassiness towards the old man. Liz Torres being the maid—how do I remember this? These are Puerto Ricans, nada que ver con los mexicanos. But you never saw the brown person being the lead until *Chico and the Man*. He was the show.

So no, there was no representation. And sadly to say, when we're a high populous, when you're represented in the media, or in entertainment.

Q: And we're just represented by one part of our identity, and not both.

Esparza: I have a saying that I always say, and I know that I've said to you, but, "Quieren el taco, pero no el taquero." They want our culture, but not the people of the culture. They just want to extract and then homogenize it into the American culture.

Q: Right.

Esparza: When I say "they," I'm referring to US citizens. That extraction of culture, especially to monetize it, to capitalize on it, to become big corporations, doesn't feel good to us, and especially when you're misrepresented, when you can't do a taco right, Taco Bell. Then we've got problems. Especially when the number one restaurant in popularity in America is Taco Bell.

Q: That's right.

Esparza: That says it all. No me entienden. Either you don't want to understand me, or you just want to extract from me, because I'm the taquero, and then leave me aside. I won't, first of all, get in your game. I won't get in your lane. I won't get in your car. I won't be in your rules. I'll just go on my own and make my own, and that's what I've done. Listen, I'm going to start writing books. In fact, I just wrote one. I'm editing it. And I hope to publish it soon, because if not, it's just going to be bigger than *War and Peace*, because I have a lot to say. And if you don't like it, you don't have to read it, because I'm not talking to you. I already know how you feel. I'm writing to that little taquero who has lost his mother's recipes to the chef, who's now putting them as the weekly special. I'm talking to the—to all the raza, to all the people that look at me and say, "How did she do it?" Because I know I was looking for representation. I don't want to be George Lopez. I don't want to be that crab that's trying to get out of the bucket. I want to get to the top of the bucket, look back down and say, "Okay, hold on to that guy, and you get on top of him, and then you get on top of that other guy, and let's go. Vámonos."

Q: Yes. Todos.

Esparza: Todos juntos, todos parejas o todos coludos, man, we have to do this together. And if it takes a woman like in Tehuantepec to run the show, then let us run it. Let's put that femininity, however it comes out, into it. Ese sabor de mujer, because a woman's place is in the kitchen. Y más.

Q: Thank you so much for this conversation, Silvana. It's been an honor and a pleasure. And we are doing this conversation in her and Serena's home en Rosarito, México, and more conversations to happen. So, muchísimas gracias [*unclear*].

Esparza: And look at the sunset.

Q: It's come down. All right.

Hazelwood: Let me make sure I—

Q: I want to press the right button. Oh! That was such a wonderful conversation. Thank you.

Esparza: Thank you.

Q: Thank you so much. I really think, I mean, I have a lot to say. But that was special. Thank you for sharing.

Esparza: Thank you very much.

Q: Thank you for sharing your story, and trusting me.

Esparza: You're an excellent, excellent interviewer.

Q: Oh, thank you! You've done a lot of interviews, so that means a lot.

Esparza: I've done a lot of interviews, yes.

Q: A lot of interviews. All right, I just want to make sure that—

Esparza: Half of the time I'm sitting there critiquing them in my head. Like, ooh, why are you asking this question? You didn't do your homework.

[END OF INTERVIEW]