AN INTERVIEW WITH ANITA TIJERINA REVILLA

An Oral History Conducted by Marcela Rodriguez-Campo

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada*.

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PREFACE

Dr. Anita Tijerina Revilla is an associate professor for the College of Liberal Arts in the Department of Interdisciplinary, Gender, and Ethnic Studies. She is a Queer Chicana scholar whose work has focused on student activism, Chicana feminism, joteria, and the Latinx educational pipeline.

Anita was born and raised outside of San Antonio, Texas on a ranch with her two siblings. After her father, Luis Arce Revilla's death, Anita and her family moved to San Antonio where her mother, Delia, took on the role of matriarch and served as a security guard. Throughout her youth, Anita recalls her mother's deep belief in her and advocacy for her educational success. She credits much of her success to her mother's support and unrelenting efforts for assuring that she had access to the resources that she needed and eventually, encouraged her to pursue a college education. She attended Princeton University, received her master’s degree from Columbia University, and obtained her doctorate from UCLA.

While at Princeton, Dr. Revilla shares, her critical consciousness began to develop and her passion for social justice was born. Later as a doctoral student at UCLA, her adviser and Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholar, Dr. Daniel Solorzano, inspired in her a pedagogical approach to teaching that centers her positionality and Chicana feminist perspective.

When Dr. Revilla first arrived in Las Vegas, she realized that there were not many Latinx faculty at UNLV. Despite this, she discovered an active and vocal Latinx student population that encouraged her to move here and make UNLV her academic home. She is a key figure in Las Vegas' Latinx and Queer community, an advocate for social justice, equity, and disrupting oppressive systems to increase educational access for students.

In 2006, she played a key role in organizing and documenting the Mayday March, Las Vegas' largest Latinx-centered protest and preserved many interviews of participants. The protest would lead to the creation of the Office of Student Diversity and Services at UNLV. She regularly serves as an adviser to several UNLV organizations and diversity committees on campus. Currently, she teaches courses that challenge racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia to create a more socially conscious and just world. Subjects: Chicana, Queer, UNLV, Social Justice, Ethnic Studies, Gender Studies

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October 9, 2018
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Marcela Rodríguez-Campo

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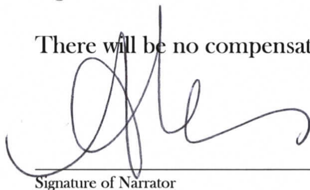

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Signature of Narrator Date

10/9/2018

Signature of Interviewer Date

My name is Marcela Rodriguez-Campo. I am with Barbara Tabach—

Laurents Banuelos-Benitez.

And...

Anita Revilla.

We are in Dr. Revilla's office at UNLV. Can you go ahead and start by telling us your name and spelling it for us?

My full name is Anita Tijerina Revilla; A-N-I-T-A. The middle name is T-I-J-E-R-I-N-A. My last name is R-E-V-I-L-L-A.

Before I forget, today is October ninth, 2018, because who knows who might listen to this in the future.

That's true.

We wanted to just start, if you could tell us about your early life, your childhood. Where did you grow up? What was that like?

I was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas. My mother is named Delia. She basically raised us on her own since she was thirty years old. My father, Luiz, died when he was thirty-one years old. He had a very difficult life, and we had a difficult life together with him. He, I think, had an undiagnosed mental illness and also experienced a lot of poverty and violence in his own upbringing. When he died, we just inherited a lot of that pain and violence that he experienced even though we were really young. The positive part was that because he died, we didn't experience the direct violence from him anymore.

My mom was a survivor of domestic violence and was very, very strong and very committed to her children. She raised three of us; my brother was ten, I was eight, and my sister was three. We didn't have a place to live because we lived at a ranch with my dad when he was

alive. When he died my mom asked us, did we want to stay on the ranch? It was just south of San Antonio. Supposedly we said no; that it was too lonely to live out there by ourselves, and so she decided to move back to San Antonio. We tried to live with her parents, but her mom was very loyal to patriarchy and very oppressive to my mother and didn't want to give her much freedom, so my mom resisted that.

Again, she had sacrificed a lot of her goals, and so she didn't have an education. She had dropped out of high school because she had married my father when she was a senior in high school and they wouldn't allow women to go to school with their husbands in the high school. He got to continue and finish his degree, and she was literally pushed out of school. She didn't get her degree until after he died. When he died, she got her GED and she decided that she needed to get a job, and so she decided to be a security guard. She got the license to carry a gun and was just like this tough little lady, five foot tall, who really wanted to reclaim a lot of her power.

I think that was the really positive thing about my father dying so young is that he was in a lot of pain because of everything he had experienced and so he was causing a lot of pain for my mom and my family, and so when he died there was a moment of freedom when my mom was able to reclaim her goals and her own autonomy. It was just this mixed experience where you have this really strong role model, a lot of strength and love and commitment and passion to children, and also the leftover trauma of her going through all of that with my father.

What was San Antonio like?

San Antonio is a very Mexican town. I don't know what the statistics are now, but it's about 60 to 70 percent Mexican, Mexican American. Primarily the people are of multiple generations, Tejanos and Tejanas; folks who have been there multiple generations. My family has been there at least four and five generations on my mom's side. I am either fourth or fifth generation. My

great-grandparents were born in Texas. I don't really have any connection to folks on the Mexico side of the border, and some people say that probably my family was in Texas when it was still Mexico.

It's just always been a cultural Tex-Mex/Tejano haven. I grew up in the Southside of San Antonio, which is also known as the very Mexican, Mexican-American area. There's a lot of internal anti-Mexican behavior or concepts; people who are born in the U.S. internalize the idea that they are better than people from Mexico. I do remember my grandparents just basically having bias toward people born in Mexico, using the word *wetback* or *mojito*. Again, these are poor working class Mexican Americans. I didn't realize it when I was a kid, but when I moved away I realized that's the way folks had internalized that discrimination in Texas. It's a complicated place because people love their culture, people love the food, the Mexican-American practices, but there's a lot of internalized shame around skin color, around the language you speak, around whether or not you have citizenship.

Again, it was like this mixed experience. I felt really immersed and enriched in my culture and then my community was all Mexican. Literally my high school probably had less than a handful of folks that were not Mexican. There were, for example, let's say, five white folks in my whole school, two black students who were brothers, two Asian American folk who were, again, relatives. Most of the white people who went to my school or lived in our side of town had been there so long that most of them were either mixed or had adopted completely a Mexican identity and culture because they had been in that community so long. It's a very Mexican place; and yet, there was still a lot of internalized shame around being Mexican, especially Mexicans from Mexico.

Why do you think that was?

Because of colonization, because of racism, because of white supremacy, because people internalize all of the discrimination that they've been taught over the years. For example, even though my family was Mexican, they still wanted to prove that they were better than people who were considered less than. Again, because we have a problem of stigmatizing people who are not citizens in this country, we call it different things; some people call it nativism; some people call it xenophobia; in my research we call it *citizenism*. It's basically the belief that people who aren't citizens of a nation are inferior and less equal.

Again, I theorize all this stuff now, but growing up it was them just trying to say—there's a book that I read where it's this phenomenon where people are oppressed and their go-to is, *at least I'm not a*... Whatever it might be. You see that a lot with anti-blackness; brown folks, for example, saying, "Well, at least I'm not black." Oppressed people of color saying, "Well, at least I'm not gay." Poor white people saying, "At least I'm not a person of color." I think that phenomena is rampant across the country and it just showed up as anti-Mexican, internalized discrimination in San Antonio. I think it's still very prevalent there and across the country.

BARBARA: What language was spoken?

When I was a child, everybody in my family spoke Spanish, so that was my first language, but always simultaneously Spanish and English was spoken. Again, my grandparents were born in Texas. My great-grandparents were born in Texas. Everybody spoke English and Spanish, but felt more comfortable probably code switching between Spanish and English or speaking Spanish period. My mom, I think, feels more comfortable speaking in Spanish. None of us are formally educated in Spanish. I've taken a few classes in Spanish. But all of it is the language that you learn; it's like an organic language that you learn in the home.

When I started school my mom and my father started switching to English and

consciously speaking it more because they had been discriminated against for speaking in Spanish in school. My mother, for example, she went to Catholic school. The nuns were white, primarily women from Pennsylvania that were very racist to them and very abusive. They literally spanked them, either paddled them or hit them on their hands with rulers or made them write lines for speaking in Spanish. When I started school, my brother and myself—my brother was two years ahead of me—they switched to English so that we wouldn't get punished.

That's the problem of a lot of multigenerational Tejanos and/or Mexicans or Latinx folks across the country is that we lose our language because our parents identify English speaking as a survival mechanism, and my parents very much did that. They thought, *in order for them not to be discriminated against, we're going to speak English to them*.

I lost a lot of the practice of Spanish. I don't think in Spanish. There are certain words that always come up in Spanish for me, but mostly I think in English and I feel more dominant in English than I do in Spanish.

BARBARA: Thank you.

MARCELA: What was school like for you?

There's a narrative that I am a smart kid and that I have been a smart person ever since I was little. When I was a baby and even before I learned to read, my dad was an avid reader, and so I used to sit with him and read with him, but basically, I was making up stories with the books, usually comics—he liked comic books—the comic books or whatever he had that he was reading. My mom says that I used to pick them up and read them and create stories from them and that they were always really impressed how smart I was.

What happened is that I was born with my hand different from other folks; I have only two fingers on my right hand and it's a shorter hand. They, I think, didn't know what that

signified for me intellectually and what they would signify as a student. They had me tested. I think my mom probably thought I would need some support. I don't know how a working class, non-higher educated woman knew this, but she was like, "She needs some help." So she had me tested, but they wouldn't help me with anything financially because they said I was too smart.

But in saying that I was too smart, it kind of set me up for success in school. I am a strong believer that people early on, however you're identified in terms of your intelligence, it really sets you up. In terms of people believing that I was going to be smart no matter what, it started when I was three. I think I was three or four when they first tested me.

Because I was too smart, they didn't want to give me any economic resources, but they let me go to a Head Start school. I started school at three or four years old and they started to teach me how to use my left hand for writing instead of my right hand. I think I was supposed to be right-handed, but, again, these were the skills they were teaching me. Simultaneously they were teaching me other things, I'm sure language and things like that. By the time I got to elementary school, I was already identified as a smart child. I was high achieving.

The earliest I remember was third grade. I got into the gifted and talented program and from that moment on I was tracked into everything accelerated. However, the school was very poor, so we had very few accelerated classes or programs. What would happen is the teachers would know that I was an advanced learner, and so they would let me do my own work, on my own. I always remember it was me and I had one classmate that was also a smart kid. We would work ahead of everybody else. Everybody would be doing their own work, and then we would be sitting on our own and basically doing independent work.

I remember when I was in fourth grade, my mom one time was saying—this is a story that she loves to tell—that I was really sad and I was crying; that I was saying the school was too

hard. She was saying, "I don't understand this. You're my smart kid." So she went to talk to my teacher and she told my teacher, "You're making her do too much work." Then he sat her down and he's like, "Look, Ms. Revilla, this is what the kids are doing, unit five. Your daughter is doing unit ten. She's basically pushing herself to do her own work, on her own. I am not asking her to do any of this." It's just kind of like those stories that kind of give me a sense of what kind of student I was.

What I also know is that I've always struggled with the fact that I had my hand different. Kids were bullies. Kids were mean, especially as I became a young teen. I felt a lot of pressure because I didn't feel beautiful enough, because I didn't feel, quote, normal. I always felt people were staring at me, and they did. They were mean, really mean, even adults. Children and adults are really mean about anybody who has different kinds of bodies or different kinds of showing up in the world. That also pushed me to be a more committed student.

Because I knew I was good in school, I thought—again, these are probably reflections—back then I knew this is where I excel, so I'm going to immerse myself in school. I immersed myself in reading. My father read. But when he died, nobody else in my family read. Nobody went to school. Reading was my escape from all of the pressures of not being a normal kid. Both reading as an escape and trying to find my value was part of my commitment to school.

Then probably by middle school, Henry Cisneros, who is the first Mexican-American mayor of San Antonio, he came and spoke to my sister's school. My sister was probably in elementary school and I was early middle school. I remember my mom saying that he was telling all the Mexican parents that they needed to encourage their kids to go to college and that that was the most important thing. I'm sure she wanted me to go to college even before then, but something about that was also very significant that this Mexican-American mayor who was very

beloved by the community was telling poor working-class Mexican parents, "Send your kids to college; that's got to be the most important thing."

I think that became one of my mom's biggest priorities. Again, she was never given access to higher education. She was told because she was a girl, she couldn't play a music instrument. She wanted to join the military. I think she really wanted to travel. But they told her she couldn't do that either. Her mandate was that she had to get married and take care of her kids. When her husband died, she had to take care of her kids; that was it. My mom was a rebellious person, and so what she dedicated herself to, was making sure that we, as her kids, especially her girls—she had two girls and a boy—but especially her girls had every opportunity that she was denied.

Even though we were extremely poor, she refused to let me work so that I could prioritize my education. Then I realized along the way that college was the way that I could get my family out of poverty. Once I realized that, probably because people kept saying, "Oh, you'll go to college; you'll make money; you'll be able to do all these things," when I realized that, that became my highest commitment, and so it became my goal to figure out what I had to do to go to college.

Again, nobody in my family had gone to college and very few of my teachers expected us to go to college because so few of us even graduated. In fact, quote, dropout, slash, push-out rate was at least 50 percent or more at my school. Again, they barely even expected us to graduate, much less go to college. I had to try to figure out, how am I going to do this?

Because I was one of the more motivated kids, by the time I was in ninth grade, there was a group of—there was one class basically, one class of students who were the honors' kids, and sometimes there weren't even enough of us to make honors' classes. Same thing happened to me

in fifth grade; my high school history teacher told us, "They won't let me teach an AP class because they don't think y'all are good enough." He literally said that. He said, "But I think you all should have an honors' class and they won't give me my own honors' class, so I'm going to teach...Half the class will be regular and a half will be honors." We had maybe two rows of honors' kids and then the rest were regular students; he had to teach two different classes in that one room.

I remember, again, him saying, "This is what you have to do to go to college. You have to join student organizations." I joined every student organization possible. I was like, Future Business Leaders Associations, Future Homemakers Association; anything that I could join. Of course, I was in student council. I was in the History Association, in the Business Association; whatever it was. Any summer program that they would tell me about, I would try to sign up for because I was convinced that I had to do everything possible to prepare myself to go to college. Because I didn't know what it actually took, I still didn't believe that I could actually get in. I still didn't know what it looked like, how people paid for it, what the process was. I was just trying to take whatever step was offered to me.

Probably I'm jumping to your other questions. By the time I was a junior in high school, what happened is I did a summer program. My physics teacher, who was pretty hands off and just kind of told us, "There's the stuff; do it," he got a red booklet. I remember the red booklet. He said, "There's some summer programs around the country and y'all are welcome to look at it." Nobody took him up on it. I believe he brought it to me and said, "Take a look at it and apply to some of these programs."

I looked at the booklet and I knew nothing about any of it. All I knew was that if I wanted to go to college, I had to do some summer programs. I had at that point done an engineering

program, a medical program, all in town because I thought, again, there is more opportunity and scholarship. This is what they would tell me: Hispanic girls can get scholarships to become doctors and engineers. I would look for those kinds of programs. They had a couple in town, but I didn't know anything about traveling to a program until he gave me that.

I applied to at least three programs; one was in Iowa, one was in Boston at Brandeis University, and I don't know where the other one was. I got into all three of them. I didn't know the difference between Iowa and Boston. But my teacher, when I told him which ones I had gotten into, he's like, "You're not going to go to Iowa." Or Idaho. I don't know which one it was. He's like, "You're going to go to Boston. I have a teacher friend who is there, and she will look out for you." It was probably only my second time traveling out of state.

In seventh grade I went to D.C. because they had a program where they let some of the more—I don't know how they chose us, but they were the gifted children who got to go to D.C. in seventh grade. My mom sent me to that. The way that she would help me travel, because we didn't have money, was she would do fundraisers. She would cook. She would recruit her family, her friends, to make barbeque plates. We would sell barbeque plates and we would raise enough money for me to get a flight basically. That's how I went to D.C. with a little group of kids, and then the same thing when I went to Boston.

Brandeis is actually in a suburb of Boston, but it's right next to Harvard and MIT. Brandeis is a private school that's predominately Jewish and very high-ranking and very wealthy. I didn't know any of that. I just knew I've got to do this program if I want to go to college.

It was a really interesting program. It only had about ten students, ten high school students. They chose two of every ethnicity to attend this summer program, to live in the dorms for maybe a month or two, and they paired you with a professor; I think they were all engineers.

I was pretending because I didn't want to be an engineer, but I thought, *I have to say this in order to get into college*. I said that I wanted to be a chemical engineer, and so they paired me with a chemical engineer. I worked in the lab for two months and I lived with these kids, these high school kids, all juniors, two black, two Asian, two—they didn't include native—two white, and I was one of the two Latinx folks—Hispanics they called us. The other guy who was Hispanic was actually a white guy who was born in Mexico when his parents were on vacation. He admitted that he checked off *Hispanic* so that he could take advantage of basically affirmative action practices. This is this weird place that I'm in.

At that point I thought, I'll get into UT Austin because the people who are in the top ten percent of their class in Texas are guaranteed access to UTs. UT Austin is one of the top schools in the state. I didn't know anything about the Ivy Leagues, but these kids did. They were the top of their class. Most of them were upper class students who had gotten 1600s on their SATs, et cetera, and were prep school kids.

They kept asking me where I was going to go to college, and I said, "Well, I'll probably go to UT Austin or maybe Rice." Because it's the other top Texas private school. They were like, "No, you're going to apply to Harvard, to Yale, to Princeton." I was like, "I don't know anything about those schools and I don't know if I can get in." They said, "You can get in because if you're here with us, we're getting in and so you should be able to get in."

I went back home my senior year and I asked the counselors—there was a program; it was Project 1000, I think. They were trying to get a thousand kids of color into college. It was a national program that they had started. I asked the Project 1000 counselor to give me an application waiver for Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Stanford. She said, "Hmm, I don't know if you can get into those schools. Why don't you consider applying to schools here in town,

like UT San Antonio? Like some of these private Catholic schools?" I knew that those schools weren't as good as the schools that I wanted to apply to. So I said to her, "Well, why don't you just give me the fee waiver and I'll apply for myself?" Because they were supposed to help you apply. But I said, "I'll apply myself and you don't have to help me, but I just need these fee waivers." So she gave them to me, and I went and applied.

I applied to thirteen schools, because again, I didn't think I could get in. I just said, "I'm just going to apply everywhere." I did all of it by myself; nobody helped me. My teachers did write me my letters of recommendation. I had two teachers, my calculus teacher and my world history teacher who were really, really supportive, but also didn't have many kids that had gone to college. I don't know what they wrote in their letters, but they helped me enough to get in.

I got in to ten of the thirteen schools, and the top two that I wanted to go to were Princeton and Columbia, and both offered me to visit the schools. They had special programs where they would reach out to the children of color, to the high school kids of color, and they brought us in. Princeton paid for it because they had more money than Columbia.

I didn't know anything between the two. The reason I applied to Princeton was because my calculus teacher, his daughter went to Princeton. That's the only person I ever knew who went to an Ivy League. He would brag about her all the time. I was in a class with him with eight girls; it was calculus. He bragged about it so much because none of us in that school really made it to calculus. It was really, really hard because it was the top math class. He even made us T-shirts and all this stuff. He talked to us so much about Princeton in that class that I think all of us applied, but only I got in.

When I went to visit Princeton, it was the same weekend that they had the minority hosting, they called it, for Princeton and Columbia. I went to Princeton and then I escaped and

went to New York for a day. New York was amazing. I was a very spiritual person back then. I still believe in sacredness, but I was very spiritual and religious back then, and so I was really praying a lot and trying to figure out, where should I go? None of it felt comfortable. All of it felt foreign and scary and detached. At the time everything felt spiritless.

But I remember going into the chapel at Princeton and feeling a sacred presence and that gave me some comfort. Then also I was minority hosting, and so what they did for their minority hosting is they would connect people of color with other people of color, so I had a Latina who was hosting me, but my Latina host, I think she was busy being a college student and having her own moment, so she gave me to her white roommate. Her white roommate was like, "What am I going to do with you?"

She took me to a play. Mind you, I never grew up around white people. White people never really came in my house. I had very little interaction with white people, and so I was very...I didn't have any preconceived notions. I just didn't know how white people would be towards me. And I had not had deeper connections or relationships. That was one of my things is that I really wasn't sure if I went here, it was such a white wealthy institution, what would it be like? I didn't know if I could connect with them.

She took me to this white play. I don't even remember what it was, but it was all white people, all white audience. I was probably the only brown kid there. It was a powerful play. All I remember was that I started crying because of something that happened in the play. Then I realize, I can have a human connection anywhere I go regardless of people's ethnicities and races. That gave me the comfort to go back home and say, "I can go to school here." So I chose to go to Princeton because of that experience. That's how I ended up at Princeton after growing up in San Antonio.

BARBARA: All I can say is wow.

MARCELA: I know. That's incredible.

BARBARA: That's an amazing story.

MARCELA: That is incredible. You grew up during the sixties.

I was born in '73. Eighties.

I know a lot of your research is about student activism and the L.A. walkouts. I was kind of curious when you were growing up if you saw any of those things and if that played any role.

No, I didn't. There wasn't a lot of activism in my life. My life was strictly about survival. There was a lot of struggle in my family. We always had a lot of problems around just paying bills. I'm sure my mom had problems around feeding us. I'm raising teens now, so I think about how your world view is really about what's happening here; you're completely self-absorbed. I was absorbed with my hand, feeling unconnected and unloved and unwelcomed in the world, and I was absorbed with school, trying to be the best possible student so I could go to college.

What happened, though, simultaneously is that because I felt such alienation and such struggle around the poverty, I think that's what shaped my interest in social justice. Even though I didn't see any activism at all in my community, I always felt uncomfortable with the way my family was anti-Mexican or they were anti-dark skin. They were very colorist. Now I know they favored the lighter skinned children in my family. There's a lot of light-skinned children in my family. My mom's side of the family is light-skinned. My dad's side is very dark-skinned and more indigenous looking. I experienced all of those things and felt uncomfortable with them, but I didn't have any name for it. I didn't have any understanding of discrimination until I went to Princeton.

When I went to Princeton, there was a summer program for, quote, minority or minoritized youth. Basically, they identified poor kids of color who they knew would struggle. They sent us maybe six weeks early so that we could get used to the campus and get some extra training. We took English classes, engineering. That's when I really knew I didn't want to do engineering. I got in as an engineer, but I was like, "I don't want to do this."

But with those young folks, one, a lot of them were politicized. I remember a young woman who was Chicana—I didn't know the word *Chicano* or *Chicana*, which is part of the Chicano rights movement and politically conscious identity. I didn't know that term until I went to Princeton. I remember us introducing ourselves, and she said, "My name is Ariana De La Rosa." She said it in Spanish, because, again, I grew up in an environment where people were Americanizing their names because they were trying to assimilate and be more acceptable to either racist people or internalized racist folk. But she said it very proudly and with a lot of passion. She said, "My name is Ariana De La Rosa. I am from East L.A. and I am proud to be Mexicana. Mexico will always live in my heart." Mind you, I grew up around only Mexicans. This was the first time I had ever heard anybody express that much pride in being Mexican.

I remember moments like that when I started to realize, something is wrong here; I was raised in an environment that didn't have any of that pride, that had a lot of shame. Again, how you think about we're so happy to be eating Tex-Mex food. We have Tejano culture, Tejano music, Tejano everything, but there's no acknowledgement that actually we're Mexican people and we love being Mexican. That never was said at least not to my memory in my childhood and I didn't hear it until I went to college.

I was trying to figure out what to do with my life because I knew I didn't want to be an engineer, but I knew I needed to make money and get a job to take care of my family. I tried to

do economics because a lot of kids who went to Princeton ended up working at Wall Street afterwards. It was almost like a pathway pipeline, Princeton to Wall Street. I thought, *oh, if I do economics, I can make money and I can take care of my family.* But it was awful. I couldn't stand it. It was boring. Then I kept just trying to take different classes.

Finally, I found a class—this is probably my second semester at Princeton—called Latinos in the U.S. and it was anthropology. It was the first class where I studied discrimination and social justice. I realized that there were all these ways—all the things that I knew was happening in my family was in the books. Then I started to get excited about the fact that if this kind of discrimination against my community and internalized discrimination was happening, then we had the power to learn about it and unlearn it. I remember calling my mom and saying, "Why didn't you talk to us more in Spanish?" Telling my sister, "Sister, don't be embarrassed of being dark-skinned. This is something that has been taught to us. We have to reject it." Little by little, just really committing myself.

We didn't have Latino Studies; it didn't exist. But there was African American Studies, Latin American Studies and American Studies where you could get a little bit of cultural stuff. Then there was one Latino professor. The anthropologist, he left; he went to Berkeley, Jorge Gordalva. I was like, "Damn it, what am I going to study now?" I had just decided that I was going to study with this guy because I wanted to learn all about this. But in his place they brought one other Latino professor. They literally were tokenizing Latino faculty. They brought one other Latino professor; his name was David Carrasco. He was a religion professor. His expertise is in Native American religion, colonialism, and specifically Aztec religion. So I became a religion major so I could study with David Carrasco. I became a minor in African American Studies, Latin American Studies, and American Studies.

I didn't know this, but Princeton basically had the top black intellectuals of the country, for generations, so people like Cornel West, Toni Morrison, Wahneema Lubiano, Nell Painter. They're all top African-American scholars. I got to study with them. That was basically where I developed my racial consciousness, from African American Studies and the occasional Latino Studies class, David Carrasco's approach to religion.

The way he taught religion was he taught about people's cultural identities as sacred experiences. He taught about Malcolm X and his transformation into his black radical identity as a spiritual sacred process. For me that was really powerful because in studying religion I realize that religion was socially constructed to oppress people; however, at the root of that was also a spiritual, sacred aspect that gave people meaning and a connection and a meaning to live. That's why I decided that I would study religion and simultaneously study race and ethnicity, discrimination.

Basically, I decided from that that I would commit my life to changing the world by teaching people that they were being taught either to oppress or to internalize that oppression and that they needed to free themselves from that discrimination by learning about history, culture, racism, et cetera. I thought I would do it as a teacher because I thought, *well, I've got to teach the young people*. I wanted to be a high school history teacher or social studies teacher.

Then I got into a master's in education at Columbia. I studied anthropology and education. I always like to study a bunch of stuff, so anthropology and education, bilingual/bicultural studies, and social studies. What I realized was that, no, I don't need to teach the kids; I need to teach their teachers. After the master's I decided I would apply for graduate programs, Ph.D. programs in schools of education so that I could teach the teachers. I thought I would do teacher education, but then I said, "I don't want to just teach the teachers. I want to

teach everybody about social justice."

When I went on the market after I got my Ph.D. from UCLA—the Ph.D. was in social sciences and comparative education with a focus in race and ethnic studies. It was basically studying racism, classism, sexism, homophobia in institutions of education. That prepared me to do a bunch of things. I realized I could teach either women studies, gender and sexual studies, ethnic studies, or education with a focus on race or social justice. There are very few programs of education and social justice areas, as you know, Marcela. When I tried to get a job, I realized I had a better chance applying to race and ethnicity and gender and sexuality studies.

Gender sexuality, I had not been trained as a feminist. I never even took women's studies or feminist classes. I took one Chicana feminist class before I started teaching. But I was a feminist, I had a feminist identity, and I was studying feminists, and so that prepared me to teach in women's studies.

Luckily, when I went on the market, the woman who worked here, whose name is Lois Humboldt, she was a white woman who was very committed to social justice work and had been exposed to study of race critically, and so she knew that UNLV was an emerging basically Hispanic-Serving Institution. We didn't call it that, but fourteen years ago she knew. She's like, "These people who are building this town have children and their children will come to this college." She created a job in women's studies that focused on Chicana feminism and borders, like borders and immigration. That's how I was able to apply for this job. She hired me with that very clear vision that someone was going to have to be here to serve the Latino students' needs.

I don't know if that answered your activism, but basically my social justice foundation or goals was connected to why I decided to study activism. I wanted to study something that I believed in; that I practiced. Somehow, I was trying to bring it all together both in the way I

studied it and the way I was trying to learn and the way I was trying to serve students and basically change the university to better meet the needs of the students who were being marginalized. I don't know if all that makes sense.

It does.

BARBARA: You came here in 2004.

2004.

And you had not been affiliated with any other university before you came here?

I was finishing up my Ph.D. at UCLA and I started teaching at Cal State Northridge and it was just adjunct, a part-time instructor. Cal State Northridge is one of the top institutions in Chicano and Chicana studies. They had probably the first Chicano Studies program, first Central American Studies program in the country. I hear different people say they were the first, but they were very well known for Chicano Studies' intellectuals and Latino Studies' intellectuals, and so I really wanted to teach there because I wanted to get that connection and exposure. As a lecturer, you don't get a really in-depth experience, but I did. I got to teach in classes where they had Chicano murals on the wall. I got to see a lot of people, like Rudy Acuña, who is one of the oldest Chicano scholars who is known in the field. These are legends. It was really powerful to be able to teach at Cal State Northridge and have that as my early teaching experiences. Then I taught a little bit at UCLA and I taught one year before coming here at Pitzer College in the Claremont schools. That was a really powerful experience because Pitzer and the Claremont colleges are known for social justice work. Pitzer, in particular, is like a white liberal activist; it's known as a activist college. It was really cool because it gave me an opportunity to work with white students who are really committed to social justice work.

I had a variety of experience. Most of the people at Cal State Northridge were similar to

UNLV now, predominately students of color, first generation students, who were really struggling in school, but really committed to being those first-generation college students. Then I had the liberal arts where it was very privileged white youth, but simultaneously they were very committed to social justice, too. It was a really nice mix before I came to UNLV and that's the only experience I had before teaching here. I've been here for the past fourteen years.

What was your first impression of Las Vegas when you got here?

I didn't want to come to Las Vegas. I didn't know anything about Vegas except that there were casinos here and I was in no way interested in casinos. I am very critical of capitalism and consumerism and glitz and gluttony and blah, blah, blah. The one time I had come here was with a friend whose family liked to gamble. She was like, "Come on, let's just go." I was like, "Okay, I guess I'll go to Vegas." I came and we stayed at the Paris. Her mother gambled all night long and lost a thousand dollars. I couldn't believe it. A thousand dollars for me was so huge me. They actually were an upper middle class Latino family. Nothing about it was exciting or entertaining to me. But it was just something that I had a little peak at.

When I saw the job—mind you, getting a job as an academic is really hard. My adviser had said to me, "If you want a faculty job, you have to be willing to travel. You have to go where the job is." California, there's so many Latinx folk who want jobs. There were more probably Latino/Latina/Latinx Ph.Ds. in California than there are probably in the rest of the country and they all want a UC or Cal State job. He said to us, "If you want a job, you're going to have to cast your net wide."

I applied for academic jobs three years in a row. The first two years I didn't get anything. I got that post at Pitzer and one other opportunity. I think I was just adjuncting. Then the third year I got an interview here and I got an interview at Cal State Dominguez Hills. I came here and

I hardly saw any Latinos. I knew there were maybe one or two other professors on campus, and they were Dr. Casas in history and Dr. Perez in the English department. There was one other Latino in the anthropology department and he's an old guy who wrote a book about Hispanics in Nevada. You should probably find him. Tony Miranda, maybe. I don't know if he's still around, but I'd love to see his oral history. I always thought I would interview him, but I didn't get to.

Anyway, I came on campus and they took me to a forum lecture. The forum lecture was a guy who I think he himself was Latino, and he was talking about, quote, Hispanics. I keep saying Hispanic, because Hispanic is not the preferred term for activists, critically conscious folk. I could tell you why. Anyway, he was talking about Hispanics and why they had trouble in the United States. Back then there was a Harvard book or study where they were saying basically Hispanics or Latinos needed to assimilate in order to succeed in the U.S., and this guy was saying the same thing. I don't remember if he was the one who wrote it or what. But I remember standing up and critiquing his argument at the forum lecture. I'm this visitor; I'm just applying; I'm nobody here. But I was just really annoyed with him because he was basically saying that Latinos needed to marry white people and needed to speak English. His research was showing that there were more and more Latinos doing that and that that was a good thing.

I critiqued it and I said, "Actually the resistance to learning the language, the resistance to adopting an American identity, the resistance to assimilating, those are all acts of survival because of their discriminatory experiences under white supremacy basically." I used the word *Chicanos* and *Chicanas* in the audience.

I remember immediately afterwards three to five little Latino students—I always say little—but young Latino/Latina students came up to me, and they were so excited. They said, "You are the first person on this campus who we've heard use the word *Chicano* in an academic

environment." They were MEChA students. MEChA is a Chicano/Chicana organization that was created in the late sixties, early seventies, and it's a nationwide organization that I am familiar with and that I had studied kind of tangentially with my research and then when I got here I became their adviser. But they were so excited and when they found out what I was doing here, "Please, please come here; we need you."

I remember thinking, okay, I can stay in L.A. I got the job at [California State University] Dominguez Hills. I got the job here. I could stay in L.A. and basically be amongst all these other Chicano and Chicana Ph.Ds. in community that has long-lasting Chicano activism or Chicano community, or I could come to Vegas and help cultivate Chicano, Chicana community and classes and all of that.

Those were really some of the significant reasons why I decided to come here instead of staying in Los Angeles, although sometimes I regret that decision because I love Los Angeles so much and because Vegas heat is pretty intense and because, truthfully, there are very few people like me in this town still. There are very few people who have critical identities, critical consciousness, who are feminists, who are queer, who are basically politically radical people who are trying to fight all kinds of social injustice in this town. There are very, very few people like me here. A lot of times Vegas has been a lonely experience for me, especially in terms of social, friends and colleagues. My colleagues are nothing like me. Most of them now, we've recruited more people of color and more critically conscious people. But back when I started here, almost everybody was white, middle to upper class, had really no kind of understanding about folks who had my experience, first-generation academics, for example. When I chose where to live, for example, when I moved here, the cheapest apartment I found was on Craig Road up in the north side. My colleagues were saying, "Do you feel safe there? How could you

live there?" Over and over good-meaning, well-meaning white colleagues kept saying racist things to me or classist things.

My partner at the time was a landscaper and he became a mechanic for UNLV. I negotiated so that he could get a job here. I remember my colleague, who is now the dean, her husband saying to me, "Oh, that must be a hard job," about my partner working in landscaping. I remember thinking, *how dare you? Do you even know what it's like to work in the sun in Las Vegas? Do you know what it's like to clean this campus up?* But I didn't say anything. It was those kinds of moments that made me think, *as well meaning as they are, as kind and generous as they are, they have no idea what it's like to live my life; what it's like to have gotten here, and so I'm not sure that I can be their friends*. And I never became their friends. They are my colleagues still and they're kind and generous, but we don't hang out together. They never invited me to their kids' parties or their barbeques, and I was always very cognizant that my white colleagues were invited to those things. Now white colleagues do invite me to things, but I'm very aware that if I go to these things, it's possible that I might get offended because there are times that I can think of that I've accepted invitations to my colleagues' houses and they've, yet again, said racist, classist things or homophobic things. I'm really, really careful about that and that has led to me having an experience here in Las Vegas that has been really challenging to stay here, because as much as I love my students and now my colleagues who I do believe have more critical thinking skills around social justice, I love them, but they're all younger than me, and it's not as easy to create those close relationships with them as it was for me when I lived in Los Angeles where there were so many people like me, and still those people are my closest friends.

MARCELA: I know that you ended up getting involved with the May Day March and I

know the 2006 May Day March was particularly a big one. I wanted to hear how you got involved with that and what that meant for Las Vegas.

I think earlier you asked me how I got into the activism. I started to really realize that it was young people who were at the forefront of a lot of social justice movements historically. When I was at Princeton, people kept saying, "If you like activism, you have to go to California." So I said, "Okay." That's what drove me to want to go to UCLA. When I went to UCLA, sure enough, the minute I got there, there was activism everywhere and the youth, the college students especially, but high school and people in the K through 12 system, were really active in all kinds of social justice work.

Back then, for example, we joined movements to support immigrants, to support laborers, to support women, to support LGBT folk. What I studied at UCLA was a Chicana/Latina student group who were leaders on campus and off campus around social justice work. What it crystallized for me was this now popular idea of intersectionality; how you have to focus on more than just one area of social justice or discrimination. It wasn't just race. It was class, gender, sexuality, et cetera. I learned about activism through that group.

When I came here, I wanted to do the same thing, but I didn't know what there was to study. I just started hanging out with young activists on campus. There were feminists. There were LGBT/queer students who were doing some activism. A lot of people say, "Oh, it's Vegas; they don't do activism." They were doing small actions. They were having small protests. They were starting to push the boundaries here on campus. They were complaining that there were no resources for students of color or diversity; that we didn't have the center for social justice; we didn't have a chief diversity officer; we didn't have any sense of that. They were, in fact, building the new student union in 2006, and my students started to protest because they wanted a

multicultural space in the student union and the university folks told them, "Well, we want it to be for everybody, so we'll put cultural art on the walls." They protested the student union.

Simultaneously you had—was it HR 4477? I forget the bill, but there was a bill that basically was saying that if you were undocumented and/or if you were aiding and abetting an undocumented person, you could be considered a felon. It was being debated and it was moving further along. Nationally there was an uproar against it. Probably in mid-March the high school students and the middle school students here in Las Vegas walked out of school. They were walking out because they were experiencing discrimination in the Las Vegas schools. There were people telling them they couldn't speak Spanish. There were teachers telling them that they had to go back to Mexico. I have an article about it and I can send it to you, but there were several incidents that led up to them getting frustrated with discrimination in Las Vegas schools. Then the bill was pushed forward. People started to protest I think in Los Angeles and Chicago and Arizona and here the youth emerged.

My students who were organizing around Chicano/Chicana activism on campus immediately came to support them. When they found out the students protested, myself included, we all went out there to go find them and walk with them and basically followed them to collect their stories. I remember a lot of my data collection was—I knew this was a research project in process. I just started taking out my recorder. I started taking pictures. I started asking kids basically, "What are you doing? Why are you out here?" Little by little, I started collecting their stories, and I have hundreds and hundreds of video and photos.

BARBARA: Where is all that?

Over there and in here.

We need to talk about that.

I started collecting all of this data. My students emerged as leaders of that effort of the 2006 immigrants' rights movement. They started working with a community group called Hermandad Mexicana. You should interview Luce Marina. I can give you her contact later. She's a Colombian who I think came from Los Angeles to create Hermandad. They had one in Los Angeles, but they wanted to create one here because we historically have not had very many nonprofits that support especially Latino community in town, and so they brought in Hermandad. It was one of the first nonprofits here in town. They had lots of Mexican federations from different towns, like Durango, Jalisco, whatever. Every little Mexican state had their own federation and they were under the umbrella of Hermandad.

My students organized the middle school, the high school students, the community college students, themselves and the community to start having regular meetings. I was a brand-new professor. I was only on campus for two years. The Women Studies Department was in Houssels House. Lois had given me a lot of rein to use that space. I advocated to have the students use to space to meet, to create posters, to basically plan their social actions, their social movement. Week after week we hosted meetings. Sometimes we would go to the community and host a meeting there. We would host forums where we would invite the community to talk about immigration, to talk about how to keep themselves safe.

They were doing all of that and simultaneously they were protesting the student union, they were asking for a diversity office, they put together a plan called—they called themselves the Alliance of Students of Color. They met with Dr. [Juanita] Fain, who is still here, to talk to her about what they needed in order to meet the needs of students of color. That's how they started creating both—when it first was created, it was called the Multicultural Center; it's now the Center for Social Justice, and then they created the Office of Diversity because of all of those

demands.

Simultaneously, they organized thousands and thousands of people to protest on the Strip. We worked with the Culinary Union. The Culinary Union is very powerful, but they tend to be very careful with not, as they said, "Not biting the hand that feeds them." That's exactly the line that they use. They are very careful to not offend the casinos. The casinos, because they knew people were protesting and they were afraid to lose money, they facilitated their employees getting out at a certain time and they negotiated with us to start the protest in the late afternoon, early evening, and they let us have the first rally on Fremont Street. If you see some of those photos, they're all in the middle of Fremont Street, which is very unlikely for a protest. But the Culinary Union leaders, who were immigrant women, they were able to negotiate that and my students worked with them. Throughout the city they sent out all this information about the protest.

Up until then they had already had maybe two protests that were all youth oriented, and the community was showing up because they were saying, "This is really powerful; we want to be a part of this." In Vegas, the people that have historically been the Latino leaders have been people with money and power, people like the Latin Chamber of Commerce, who I'm sure y'all are interviewing. But they were extremely conservative compared to the students and extremely ageist. They wanted the students to get the word out and tell people that they wanted to fight for immigration reform, but they didn't want the students to be extra critical of racism, of sexism, of classism, homophobia; there were different ways.

I can tell you a whole story about how they were strategically trying to silence the students and the students kept saying, "No, this is what we're doing." Eventually they split, the Latino leaders. It wasn't just the Latin Chamber. It was other Latino politicians who were telling

the students, "This is the right way to protest. We have to get people to vote." And the students were like, "Yes, we'll vote, but we also have to protest." There was conflict over, should we have an American flag? Should we be allowed to have our own national flags? They wanted them to get rid of their Mexican flags. They wanted them to get rid of basically their own authentic identities, and the students were pushing back against all of that.

They did work collectively during that one time, and so it was probably the biggest protest that the city has ever seen that has been Latino/Latina based. It started at Fremont Street and it went all the way to New York New York. It was literally like a parade. What happened is we left Fremont Street. They had a kickoff and some people talk and present and dance and pray. Then the students were like, "We need to protest." That was their biggest thing. They weren't as interested in the celebration. The casinos wanted more of the celebration of the cultural identities, and the students wanted to show that they were basically fed up with the discrimination. Immediately they started to walk out of Fremont Street and down Las Vegas Boulevard, which that was highly contested because they didn't have legal permission. I think they had legal permission to be on the sidewalks, but there were so many people that they couldn't contain it. Not only that, people were literally waiting at each intersection to join the group. It was so huge, they literally shut down the Strip on that day. I remember we started probably at five and we ended up at New York New York at around ten or eleven. It was a five-hour march down the Strip. The students were incredibly energized and just really excited about all the work. The community was there. There were people of all ages. It was just one of the most amazing things I'm sure they've experience, myself included.

Do you think that the valley has changed or evolved? What impact do you think that had?

I think there are immediate shifts that happened. People really started to realize the power. Vegas

is still known as a union town, and so people know the power of unions. But there was a different understanding of the power of brown bodies, who are workers in this city. And I'm sure the casinos knew this, but there was a real awareness that if the immigrant people who are sustaining the Strip basically cleaning it, cooking, taking care of it, holding it up on their backs, if they are not working, then you don't have a successful Strip. You'd have to ask people who were leaders of the union and what immediate impact they had there in terms of actual tangible stuff, but I know the city had an awareness, the people who were talking had an awareness that the immigrant laborers of this town were essential to the success of the wealth of this city.

The long-term effect was that these students who were middle, high school, community college and university students, dedicated the rest of their lives to this work. One of the things that I've seen is students have become politicians now. The same activists that I worked with are now politicians or assemblymen. They're running for senators. Nelson Araujo was a high school student. Edgar Flores, I forget what he's doing now.

LAURENTS: He's an assemblyman, I believe.

He's an assemblyman. Who is Nelson's cousin? She's a lawyer and she was also running for office. I'm sure Lucy Flores was also connected in some way. Folks like Ruben Kihuen were there at the protest. He was already politically involved, but I think that catapulted his work as well. A lot of them also became teachers, educators. Some are pursuing Ph.Ds. to become professors. There is a lot of them that are lawyers.

I remember one of the youngest persons that I interviewed was a twelve-year-old girl whose mother was in the union; her name is Jessica Padrón. She is still very, very active in the Democratic Party and organizing people in town to vote. I imagine she'll have a political career herself. I think she's maybe a recent UNLV graduate. It is powerful to see this twelve-year-old

girl, now in her mid-twenties still very committed to this work, regularly sending me messages on Facebook, like, "Hey, how can we get people to come out to this event? How can we organize this?"

The first community college students that I met were queer students. There were a lot of queer students, a lot of feminist students, a lot of very marginalized students who were very aware of all of the discrimination and they were also very committed to fighting on all of those fronts against the discrimination. I think I mentioned Juanito Espinoza. He started the first Gay-Straight Alliance at Las Vegas High School when he was a high school kid. This is even before I got here. It was in the news because that's a very Mormon school and there was big drama over it. He tells the story and he says, "We're a bunch of undocumented immigrant students who are tired of being bullied, who are tired of being discriminated against. So we created this organization to empower ourselves and to reclaim our own space."

Then he went to community college at CSN back then and then came here to UNLV. He became a Women's Studies major. One of the reasons he became a Women's Studies major was because he was part of the immigrant rights movement and he met me and we talked about what should he study, and I said, "Well, why don't you study Women's Studies?" And he said, "What am I going to do with that?" And I said, "Well, you're going to change the world; that's what you're going to do." And he was like, "Okay." He studied Women's Studies and now he's a teacher in a charter school on the east side, Equipo. Again, he's got this very radical approach to teaching where he's teaching the students to empower themselves and reclaim their cultural identity. There's lots of my students that work there at Equipo.

In my fourteen years I have already seen all of these changes, all these people who once thought, *I'll never have the ability to leave Las Vegas because I'm undocumented*. This is prior to

DACA. A lot of them didn't have DACA; they didn't have residency; they didn't have permission to move around in this country or to even work in this country. I remember these leaders who were trying to fight for Vegas rights for their parents, for their family members. They didn't know that they would have a future. Now, again, they're all working professionals who are either working as organizers or working as educators or lawyers, doing really amazing work.

BARBARA: That's powerful knowledge.

Thank you.

LAURENTS: I'm just looking around your office and Frida [Kahlo] is all over. If you can speak on Frida. I see the biography on your desk as well. I just want you to speak on her influence on your life.

I have a short essay I can share with y'all if you want. I have had a Frida love affair for probably...Let's see. How many years since 1991 has it been? Twenty plus years.

BARBARA: You took calculus.

Yes. And after calculus I took no more math, just FYI, because I realized I didn't need it anymore.

In my first year in college, remember I was coming from this background of internalized anti-Mexican basically hatred. I had never been proud of my cultural identity, especially my skin color. It was just something that I wasn't cognizant of or that I had disconnected from. But I remember going into one of the upper classman's dorm room and he had a calendar, kind of like that one right there, but it was all Frida work. I remember looking at it and saying, "Who is this woman? She looks really intense." She had a hairy lip, mustache. She had this intense look of pride, these eyes that looked both proud and resilient. She had cultural clothing, garb, the flowers in her head. She had a shawl. She had color. I just thought, *I have never seen an image so*

powerful. I have never seen a Latina woman so proud and so fierce. Only looking at her image that you could see all of that.

So I said to him, "Who is this woman?" He said, "Oh, that's Frida Kahlo. She's a Mexican artist." I basically became obsessed with learning about her. Luckily this book, *A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Hayden Herrera's book, which is the one that Salma Hayek's movie was based on—that movie is actually pretty good—this book was assigned for one of my religion classes. I read it and, again, just knowing it was basically a very deep sacred experience for Frida to reclaim cultural identity, indigenous identity, her body as a woman who experienced basically her accident, which mutilated her body. I don't know how much you know about it. She was in a trolley accident. The trolley punctured her womb. She broke her back. She was in all of this pain.

For me, Frida's pain and her ability to remain resilient and confident and proud and, again, fierce, really intensely fierce—it was a role model to me of somebody beyond my mother (Delia), because my mom is like that. Basically, she's got the same broken column that Frida has. She had a car accident that disabled her. She doesn't work anymore because somebody ran into her while she was working as a security guard at a hospital. A nurse ran into her and she became disabled. She's a chronic pain person. Her body has come apart slowly over the years. I knew this about my mom, I knew this about Frida, and I also desperately wanted some sense of reclamation of myself and my identity.

Frida was a feminist. She was a labor rights activist, a socialist. She was queer. She is bisexual. She actually was in an open relationship before people even talked about open relationships. She was a disabled woman who did not identify herself through her disability. Again, she was probably my earliest version and understanding of intersectional feminism before it was a popularized term. For me she was just a source of pride.

What I realized was that in claiming her as a part of my life, people knew who I was. If you see Frida, you know. I have a big Frida tattoo right here. You see Frida on my body, on my earrings. I have Frida earrings, I have Frida clothing, all these things. If you see her, you know that there's something about me that resembles strength, resilience, feminism, if you know her well enough, queerness, social justice activism.

One of the reasons that she's also really important to me here in this room, in this space, is because the university doesn't reflect me. If you go to other professors' offices, they don't look like this. They look like libraries. They might have their university diploma on the wall. For me the university diploma does not identify me. For me, my social justice consciousness defines me. Frida is a visual interpretation of that social justice consciousness. It's my earliest connection and my most long-lived connection to social justice.

That's why I like to have her around, to remind people. You don't even have to ask me. You can just see, oh, if she likes Frida, she might like this; she might know about this; she might be a feminist; she might like art. And I do; I paint.

I didn't even know I was a painter until maybe seven years ago. I liked art. I took it in high school. I thought I might be good at it, but nothing about our society encourages people to be artists and I was busy trying to make money to take care of my family.

But, as you might know, Marcela, I inherited my sister's children ten years ago. My sister struggles with mental illness. She's bipolar with schizoaffective disorder. When she had her first mental breakdown, she came to Vegas and brought her kids with her, who were three and four years old, Michael and Rayana, and she asked me to take care of them. Then she said, "I have to leave. I have to go back to Texas. And so you're going to have to take care of the kids." That has literally been the hardest thing I have ever had to experience.

It was because of them that I started to ask myself, how do I identify myself? What am I doing for myself? How am I taking care of myself? People kept asking me those questions, but I didn't have any answers. Everything that I did was in the service of community, in the service of social justice, in the service of my family. I remembered that I liked art and I took some painting classes and I became a painter, so that was yet another connection to Frida.

There's a lot of things that Frida signifies. Also, Frida was a depressed person. Mental illness and depression runs in my family. In fact, that's also one of our biggest struggles in my family. Like I said, my father was probably bipolar himself, but never diagnosed. I think a lot of the violence that he inflicted on my mom was rooted in his own mental illness and whatever he was struggling with. My sister has a lot of the same characteristics that my dad did. People think about things like alcoholism and drug addiction. They tend to just see those as isolated bad habits or sometimes they see them as illnesses, but they don't realize that they're so rooted in trauma, both inherited genetic and social trauma, and I think that's been the story of my family. My family has consistently been fighting against and in the face of mental illness and depression. Frida is a depressed person. She even wanted to die. Folks will talk about her last diary entry where she said, "I am ready to leave this existence and I hope never to return." I think about that and that also really shapes how I understand life and how I understand people's desire to die sometimes because they're in so much pain whether mentally or physically or both. There's a lot of stuff wrapped up in my love of Frida.

MARCELA: That was the question that I wanted to ask, but my question was going to be, what mentors you have had in your life that have helped you arrive to where you are right now?

My mom was my first feminist model. When my dad died—like I said, he was very physically

and emotionally abusive. I think because he had no power anywhere else, he inflicted a lot of pain on my mom. He was physically violent and demanded ridiculous things like, get up in the middle of the night and make me dinner; whatever. She was just under his power for so long that when he died it was a moment of liberation for her. She reclaimed herself on so many levels. Changed the way she looked. Started going out dancing. She loves to dance. Told us, "No man can ever tell you what to do." In fact, was very anti-man. I've had to work a lot on that and healing some of the stuff that my mom used to say because she was so wounded from her experience with my father, but, at the same time, she was so strong and so adamant. She fixed our car. She fixed our house. She could do it all. Also, she believed that we could do it all, anything we wanted to do. That gave me a lot of strength and a lot of self-empowerment.

I didn't have a lot of other mentors, especially feminist mentors, *womentors* or *mujertors*, until I went to UCLA. In undergrad, Princeton is a very conservative place, so they weren't very welcoming of feminists. They weren't very welcoming of queer students—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender students. Even though I maybe had a sense that I could be queer, I was living a heterosexual life and I was very comfortable with it. There, because of the homophobia, I never really explored my sexual identity, but I had a sense that there was a possibility that maybe I could love more than just somebody of the, quote, opposite sex. But it was still very closed off until I went to, first, in Texas I had some gay friends, who were like, "Let's go to the gay bar." So it's like, "Okay." It was again more welcoming and supportive. Then when I went to UCLA, I met the women from La Raza Women.

La Raza Women was a Chicana/Latina org that I studied. They were younger than me, but they were my feminist mentors. They were the ones who taught me about Chicana feminism. They were the ones who were teaching me to really question my sexual identity, to think about

patriarchy and the idea that men should be central and powerful, et cetera. They were very critical of all of those things. They were the ones who expanded my understanding of social justice by inserting that feminist perspective and also the queer perspective. I think after that I met other Chicana feminists in the academy, professors, people who were authors, people like Cherrie Moraga. I had read Gloria Anzaldúa, and even though she had passed away, she is obviously—not obviously; you know—she is one of the most well-known Chicana feminists in the field and she became my core understanding of Chicana feminism. I even identified myself as an Anazldúaista because my identity is so connected to her and her writings. They weren't real people always; sometimes it was just authors, but then other times I got to meet them. There were a lot of mainly Chicana professors who I looked up to and who I appreciated and learned from, but I had very few of them work with me directly because there was not a lot of them at the university and because in my life there were very few elder women who were people who were playing that role for me. I think between La Raza Women and the Chicana scholars and my own colleagues, my own classmates, I developed a strong base of kind of like an interdependent Chicana mentorship, *mujership*.

My professor, who was my adviser, he is a man and he is probably one of my favorite people in the world, Daniel Solorzano. He is a Chicano education expert. He's the one who taught me critical race theory. He basically created the space for me to study anything I wanted to study. When I said, "I want to study Chicana feminism and revolution," he was like, "Okay." I remember really critiquing grad school and saying, "Why do I want to do this? My community doesn't even get access to higher education. It's all bullshit. Why are we even in academia?" He said to me, "I am here because I believe in the same thing you believe in. We are working towards the same goals." He said, "You have a fire that is inside of you. It is my job to make sure

that fire stays lit while you're at the university, while you're in academia. We might not do things the same way. We might not accomplish social justice in the same way. But as long as I can maintain your fire lit, then I've done my job."

For me Danny was the person who held me up the highest. It wasn't a woman, outside of the community of scholars. But he allowed me to emerge as my own basically feminist *mujerista*/Chicana feminist identity. Under his guidance I was able to develop all of those things that I am today as an academic. He was my biggest model. He was the one who said, "We don't have to do the cutthroat competitive academic stuff that places like UCLA foster. We can respect each other. We can work in community. We can prioritize students. We can prioritize community voices, people of color's voices, poor people's voices." He modeled all of that for me. A lot of the person that I am as a professor is rooted in the way he taught me, and all of us. There's waves of scholars, Chicano, Chicana, people of color, white folk who have worked under him who have adopted very similar pedagogical and theoretical practices in academia.

BARBARA: You listed some other community activities that you're, I assume, currently active in.

Kind of, yes.

The Immigrant Rights Coalition, Undocumented Task Force, do you want to talk about those at all?

Sure. My biggest role at the university has been to create access to folks who have historically been denied access to the university. Things that I do are I am the adviser of MEChA. MEChA is Movimiento Estuddiantil Chicanx de Aztlán. It is basically a Chicano student org connected to civil rights movement, and then also the UndocuNetwork, which is created by undergraduate students—now one is a graduate student and one is soon to graduate. I'm the adviser for those.

Simultaneously, when the UndocuNetwork was created, we also created a task force that included faculty staff and students to meet the needs of undocumented students on campus; it's called The Undocumented Student Task Force. There's one at the university, at UNLV, and there's one that's NSHE-wide. For probably the past five, six years we've been working collectively to try to create awareness of undocumented students on campus and how to meet their needs. We've asked for an undocumented resource coordinator who can help students on campus. Usually what happened is because parents read about me in a newspaper, somebody interviewed me, they would say, "Oh, that parent works with immigrant students; she supports immigrant rights." They would call me or email me and ask me, "How can my child go to school? Can my child go to college? How can they get some support?" I was left basically scraping around, trying to figure out, who could help these students? How could we help them apply? How could we support them once they're here? We did a lot of that without any institutional support and under-the-table type thing, how do we help these students? Then when DACA came into place, it gave us a lot of opportunity to start to advocate for students more.

I've done those task forces. I've also been part of every Latino faculty group that we've had. There's been different manifestations. We tried to create a study of race, an ethnicity center that never came to fruition, but we spent lots of time on. I am part of the Latinx Faculty Alliance that's probably one of the longest existing faculty groups of color along with some of the African-American faculty organizations. We've done a lot of work in advocacy through them.

The Sanctuary Alliance that I put on there we created when Trump was elected knowing that his platform and the people who supported him would specifically start to target marginalized people in the country and on campus, and so we advocated as faculty and staff and students to the university president and the provost to ask them to have policy in place, to have

offices in place to support those faculty and students. The Sanctuary Alliance has basically been the counter or the ally and worked in solidarity with the students who protested two or three years ago to ask for the intersection that just got created, to get the resource coordinator. We've consistently met with the president and provost to say, "These are the needs of these students. How can we support queer students, women, immigrant students, students of color on campus?"

Right now that advocacy work looks like, let's say, the Sanctuary Alliance, or I'm also the chair of the Council for Equity and Opportunity. I'm on the President's Advisory Committee. I'm on every single little diversity committee that you can think of to try to do this advocacy work because students and faculty and staff have consistently said, "We feel marginalized; we feel silenced; we feel scared; we're not welcome." When they experience discrimination of any kind, they need somebody who will speak on their behalf and be willing to do that work. Those organizations have usually given me—and just a couple of other faculty have been willing to speak out—the opportunity to speak to folks in power on this campus.

The Immigrant Rights Coalition, I put that on because it was a more formal organization when we started back in 2006, and it was the core of probably six to seven of my years here in Las Vegas. It's not as regular as it used to be. They still call on me, for example, to help organize the May first protest or to help get the word out, but I don't work with them as actively. But for a good six, seven years that was where I did all of my work, with that coalition, and it was the same coalition from 2006 of community members, university students, also younger youth who were all involved in that one network of people. I still feel very connected to them, but we're not meeting necessarily in person. We're kind of a network of people who support each other in town, and so when we need each other's support, we come to each other's aid.

MARCELA: Two final questions. First, you started critiquing the difference between

Hispanic and Latinx. Could you tell us about that?

Yes. I'll tell you just how I understand the terms and how I teach about them. The word *Hispanic* is the most generic term that we use to identify our community. It was created by the census folk and popularized during the eighties where they were trying to figure out how many people from Spanish-speaking countries were in the United States. The U.S. Census put all of us, including people from Spain and Latin America, including Central and South America, into this generic terminology *Hispanic*. Anybody who studies Latino or Latina studies or Chicano/Chicana studies knows that the term is heavily critiqued because it prioritizes Spanish ancestry; it prioritizes Spain as the primary identity. And Spain, they're the colonizers; they are the ones who came to the Americas, committed genocide, and stole the land from the indigenous people, and simultaneously mixed with some of them, and that's how we became a people, mestizos/mestizas.

Chicanos and Chicanas, people of Mexican origin in the U.S., reclaimed the term *Chicano*. It used to be a term to refer to the poor people of Mexico. During the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, which is in the early seventies, they used that term as a political term to call for the rights of Mexican-American people. Again, anybody who studies the Chicano Rights Movement knows that that term is considered more political, more committed to community, self-chosen versus imposed. Hispanic is imposed; Chicana and Chicano is reclaimed and self-chosen.

Similarly, Latino and Latina was a national movement to reclaim an identity and reject the word *Hispanic*. People from the Caribbean, Central America, South America, anybody with Latin American roots, including Mexico, adopted *Latino* and *Latina* as an umbrella term. Originally, we all call ourselves Latinos with an O because we thought that that included all of

us, men and women. Latino signifies masculine. Latina with an A signifies feminine, so it signifies women. For a long time, we debated about how to be more inclusive of men and women, and so we said Latino with an O and backslash A, or if you wanted to prioritize women, you would do A first then slash O. Then people said, "Well, let's put them together." So they did the little...The "at" sign. I forget what it's called. But some people use that to signify gender inclusivity of men and women, but there is a critique of that because the O was surrounding the A, so masculine was surrounding the feminine, so there were critiques of that. Now primarily people continue to use O and A to signify gender consciousness, including women. But because there are so many queer people and non-binary people, people who don't identify with either male or female designations of gender, they're called gender queer; they're called non-binary; they're called gender nonconforming. We've created another term—it came from community activists and scholars as well—where we put an X at the end of Latino or Latina, so it's Latinx or Chicanx basically eliminating the gendered O and A. People say the reason that we use X—there are different reasons—but the reason that we use X is because X is kind of an unknown. If I call you Latinx, I am not making an assumption about your gender identity; I am basically saying you have the right to identify your own gender regardless of how you present yourself. It's considered the most gender-inclusive terminology and the most culturally politically conscious terminology, is either to use Latinx or Chicanx. If you use Hispanic, it's considered more assimilated, and assimilation is heavily critiqued amongst activists and scholars, too, because if you're assimilating you're trying to be more white, and usually that was what was imposed upon us by the U.S.; the folks in power were basically telling us, if you want to be accepted, you have to become more like white people; you have to stop eating your foods; you have to stop speaking your language; you have to stop being so proud of your ethnic identity and basically become a,

quote, American.

What people don't know is white people went through that same assimilation process. White people are, quote, ethnic people, too. They have ethnicities: They're Polish; they're German; they're Italian. But they were asked to eliminate their cultural identities in order to become American. Latinx folk resisted; they continue to resist, and that's why we're considered bad Americans sometimes because we want to maintain our language and our cultural practices. Instead of assimilating we acculturate. To acculturate means to adopt multiple cultural aspects, so you adopt American practices, American generic whatever—we've identified as American—and you maintain your cultural identity. Most importantly under acculturation, you maintain pride of your cultural identity, as opposed to assimilation where most people were taught to be ashamed of their language and their practices and their cultural identities. That's why I use those terms.

BARBARA: This is wonderful.

MARCELA: We've been having a very long conversation about all these different terms.

It's complicated. One of the beautiful things, again, about language and the way we shift and change our language and the way we spell things is that it shows that we've evolving and that we're constantly in dialogue with each other. Some of these terms will always be with us and some people will always reject *Latinx* or these different evolutions of identity. But youth especially, which is why I study youth, will say, actually no, this older generation hasn't quite understood how to identify me, and so let me tell you how I wish to be identified. I think that's where Latinx came from or Chicanx came from.

BARBARA: And linguists love that.

Well, the linguists hate it. I'm sure they study it, but a lot of people, for example, in either

Spanish or English departments, academics are very much opposed to shifting some of the practices because it's, quote, incorrect. You've heard people say, "Speak Spanish correctly." Well, whose Spanish? A colonizer's Spanish? Who gets to decide which Spanish is the best manifestation? The fact that we even have a hierarchy of what's good Spanish or bad Spanish, the fact that we critique Spanglish, for example, or Tex-Mex Spanish, those are all consequences of colonialism and discrimination. We always prioritize the whiter, more powerful colonizers in these language. A lot of people really reject the way that the terms have changed because they are reflective of the more marginalized people in these communities as opposed to more powerful people in the communities.

MARCELA: Final question and this one is messy, so bear with me. You've talked about your Chicana identity and *mujerista*. How do you negotiate those identities when you're showing up in the classroom or in academic spaces? What's your intentionality behind how you choose to show up in spaces in how you identify?

I think it's similar to the question about Frida and why Frida is so important. For me it's really important to show up as my most authentic self. My biggest challenge in academia has been staying true to who I really am, a working-class child of a fierce working-class mom who has experienced violence, who has experienced poverty, who has experienced lots of other challenges and struggles. For me I know that especially here at UNLV, but in academia in general, people don't get to see people like me in the classroom. They don't get to see me being the supervisor or the chair very often. Mostly students haven't seen Latina/Latino professors at the head of their classroom. They aren't used to people like me having a voice and authority, and so I like to remind them that even if I have gained access to higher education, and sometimes I have a certain kind of power in these spaces that I still am very connected to the various

communities that I have originated from.

When I'm in the classroom, I'm very clear about where I'm from and who I am. Most of my first weeks of class, I'm talking about who I am, how I'm different than most of their professors, the fact that I'm queer or the fact that I'm Latina. It really makes students feel sometimes uncomfortable because they're not used to professors going deeper into who they are. But as I tell my students, who you are and how you showed up into this classroom largely impacts how you teach it, how you understand it, and how you engage in the work, and that's true for English, that's true for history, that's true for math even, but then none of them will acknowledge it because all of us as academics have been taught to compartmentalize our lives; this is the personal and this is the professional.

The feminist perspective is that we shouldn't compartmentalize ourselves; that, in fact, it's patriarchs who have taught us at work you have to behave this way and you have to pretend you don't have children and you don't have a life and you don't have all of these other struggles because this is the professional way to be. But that's a male perspective of how you should be. Women and people of color and people who have been marginalized know, actually no; all of those things that impact me outside of my job are impacting me how I show up here in this very place.

I tell the students that because I think it gives them a deeper understanding of what I'm trying to teach them, which is racism, classism, sexism, homophobia. All of these isms and phobias that we deal with out in society are at play in every part of our lives, in the classroom and outside of the classroom. Unless they understand how our social categories impact how we show up in the classroom, then they're not really going to understand why it's so important to study these things and to integrate them into their academic lives and their professional lives or

even their personal lives. That's how I show up in the classroom.

LAURENTS: I do have one last question. You kind of piqued my interest when we adopt American practices into our culture. But I kind of want to get your perspective on the criticism that we get. We adopt them, but we don't keep them how they are, traditional; we change them. I'm thinking the American dream is to own a car. We took the car and we invented the low rider. We take American food, like the hot dog, *pero le hechamos* bacon *con pico de gallo*, but we get criticized for it because we take...I want to get your perspective on why do we get criticized and all that.

That's what I was basically referring to when I said that Latinos/Latinx folk have been kind of a disappointment to the American assimilation product because they wanted us to be like Italian folk or like Irish folk who maybe they had some practices, maybe they still liked spaghetti, but they became Americans. That was basically what all these white folks were being told: If you want to be a real American, you can't be an Irish American; you can't be a German American; you can't be even a Jewish American; you have to be an American. Some white folk have resisted that but most of them didn't. Most of them are very proud and committed to that because to be a, quote, good American, a socially constructed good American, you have to reject your ethnic, cultural practices. But for them they compartmentalize it, too. You might have an Irish festival, and this is the one time you get to remember that you have Irish ancestry, but overwhelmingly it can't be your primary identity.

This is why I think that the United States has pushed for this. This is why I know that the United States has pushed for this, because our country is built upon the wounding and destruction of cultural identities and cultural communities. In other words, this country, the way it was built, was by committing genocide on native people, by enslaving African people and

bringing them here against their wishes, by stealing Mexican land illegally and violently, by exploiting Asian labor, by treating Irish people like they were less than, or Italian people, or Jewish people, until they adopted whiteness as an identity. What adopting whiteness allows them to do is pretend that all of that other stuff, all of those other injustices no longer matter.

So when we assert our cultural identity and practice, there is a fear that if you assert your cultural identity, you're also going to uncover your history. If you uncover your history, you uncover the wound of this nation. The wound of this nation is discrimination. It's really intense. What we have done as a nation legally is told people that we have to be blind to race, we have to be blind to gender; we have to be blind to all of these things in order to be fair. Color blindness was inflicted upon us by the courts. In other words, all of the laws, the early anti-segregation laws, the way that they were trying to fight them was to say, we have to be blind; justice is blind; we can't look at your race; and if you look at your race, then that's racist. So we all internalize this idea that in order to be, quote, good people, we have to be color blind, which meant we had to abandon a lot of our cultural identities and histories.

But what people realize is that when we ignored all of that stuff, it festered. I tell my students it's like an open wound. It's like you cut yourself on your hand. If you ignore it, the wound starts to get infected. It gets pussy and disgusting. You can cover it up with whiteness and American flags and we can all do good in the United States if you just want it bad enough. But then people start to uncover that wound and they say, well, actually our foundation was already built upon a very unequal and brutal experience, and so we had to clean that wound up. That's what ethnic studies is; we're trying to clean up the wound; we're trying to teach people about their history and about these wounds so that they can do the work of actually engaging in conversations about racism and conversations about white guilt and conversations about why it is

that people of color are embarrassed to be themselves sometimes.

We get criticized because there is a huge fear that we will rebel against the color-blind ideology that's still very much a part of our fabric. The color-blind ideology tells us to get over race; to get the chip off your shoulder; all that propaganda. That's why it's so scary when people don't assimilate or refuse to let go of not just their culture, but their history.

I know they're long answers, but they're complicated questions.

This is wonderful.

BARBARA: This has been a great interview.

I'm glad you appreciate it.

Anything else that you want to share with us?

MARCELA: That you wish we would have asked?

No. I am sure there's lots more that I could talk about.

BARBARAA: How does all this impact how you raised the two children?

That's a whole other part of my life.

Rayana and Michael, right?

Yes. Ray identifies as Ray instead of Rayana. Her name is Ray. They identify as "they," not as "she." They're my little...I don't know. They wouldn't identify themselves as feminist children, but they're definitely feminist, social justice trained children.

MARCELA: Oh, yes.

It's a lot of work for them. It's a lot of pressure for them. Also, simultaneously I think it gives them a lot of freedom to be who they want to be. They're very self-assertive. They have very deep reflective thoughts about life and the world.

Still they struggle with all of the stuff that every teenager struggles with. They struggle

with parental authority. I think I'm waiting to see how all of it manifests as young adults. It's my biggest goal to raise, again, self-autonomous, healthy young people who are fully aware of the trauma of our lives and the trauma of the social life and are really working to commit to healing themselves and to being good people. I think that that is happening, but there are days when it feels like, oh, what am I doing? Am I doing the right thing?

But, yes, they're definitely another facet of life where I see a lot of the things that I was taught and the things that I teach coming to life in little bodies. They are now thirteen and fourteen years old, so we'll see.

BARBARA: I'm sure you're doing a great job.

We'll see five years from now.

MARCELA: They're pretty awesome. I got to talk to them when you had that book club on Borderlands, and I was like, *wow, I wish I was like you when I was your age.* They were incredible.

Yes. They don't always appreciate it. They're like, "Do we have to talk about feminism again?"

They're so bright. They're really bright.

Yes.

BARBARA: Thank you so much for your time.

You're welcome. Thank you for taking the time with me.

MARCELA: Thank you.

You're welcome.

PHOTO: Dr. Anita Tijerina Revilla in her office with Marcela Rodriguez-Campo on October 9, 2018.