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MONICA PALACIOS

INTERVIEWED BY KAREN MARY DAVALOS

ON AUGUST 9 AND 14, 2007

Writer and performer Monica Palacios grew up in San Jose, California. She received her BA from San Francisco State University. She lives in Los Angeles, where she writes, performs, and produces solo and collaborative works. Palacios has taught at UCLA, UC Riverside, Loyola Marymount University, the Claremont Colleges, and the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and is currently a visiting artist at UC Santa Barbara.

Karen Mary Davalos is chair and professor of Chicana/o studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Her research interests encompass representational practices, including art exhibition and collection; vernacular performance; spirituality; feminist scholarship and epistemologies; and oral history. Among her publications are *Yolanda M. López* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2008); "The Mexican Museum of San Francisco: A Brief History with an Interpretive Analysis," in *The Mexican Museum of San Francisco Papers, 1971–2006* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2010); and *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

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THE CSRC ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

The CSRC Oral Histories Series publishes the life narratives of prominent Chicano and Latino figures. The life narratives have been recorded and transcribed, and the interviewer and interviewee have reviewed and corrected the transcriptions prior to publication. These oral histories are often undertaken as part of a larger research project and in tandem with archival collections and library holdings.

CSRC ORAL HISTORY SERIES PROJECTS

L.A. Xicano documents the history of Chicana/o art in Los Angeles with a focus on artists, collectives, and art organizations. The project resulted in new museum and library exhibitions, public programs, archival collections, and scholarly publications. These efforts were part of the Getty Foundation initiative Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945–1980. The project received support from Getty Foundation, Annenberg Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and California Community Foundation. Related support includes funding from Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, AltaMed Health Services Corporation, Entravision Communications Corporation, Walt Disney Company, and individual donors.

A Ver: Revisioning Art History stems from the conviction that individual artists and their coherent bodies of work are the foundation for a meaningful and diverse art history. This book series explores the cultural, aesthetic, and historical contributions of Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other U.S. Latino artists. The A Ver project is made possible through the generous support of Getty Foundation, Ford Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Joan Mitchell Foundation, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, and The Rockefeller Foundation.

The LGBT and Mujeres Initiative seeks to increase archival and oral history holdings that document the Chicano/Latino presence in LGBT and women’s histories, the role of women and LGBT people in Chicano/Latino histories, and the importance of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in “mainstream” scholarly research and archival institutions. The project receives generous support from the Ford Foundation and individual donors.

ARTISTS INTERVIEWED FOR THE L.A. XICANO PROJECT

Judy Baca
Charles “Chaz” Bojórquez
David Botello
Barbara Carrasco
Leonard Castellanos
Roberto “Tito” Delgado
Richard Duardo
Margaret Garcia
Johnny Gonzalez
Judithe Hernández
Leo Limón
Gilbert “Magu” Luján
Monica Palacios
John Valadez
Linda Vallejo

INTERVIEW WITH MONICA PALACIOS

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AUGUST 9, 2007

Karen Mary Davalos: Today is August 9, 2007. This is Karen Mary Davalos, interviewing Monica Palacios. We're starting again. Hopefully this time everything will function. Monica, why don't you tell me about what you're doing now, what you're working on now?

Monica Palacios: Presently, I am adapting a play into a screenplay. That is what I'm working on right now, besides other—still writing and performing other things, but I have this goal of completing a first draft of this screenplay by the end of August. Yes, that's in a few weeks from today.

KMD: Yeah. This being your first screenplay, what got you going towards screenwriting?

MP: Well, I finally graduated with a BA in film, and at the end of that time—this was '82—I was already charged up and ready to hit the stage. Loved my film classes, adored it, and I always felt that I would someday make a film, but the performing world came to me, and I had to go that route. But even in my performance work, it's very filmic, has always been that way. My short stories [are] always very filmic. So the film was always in my blood. When I wrote this play, when I started writing this play in '97, at the end of '97, I cranked out eight pages, and I knew that it was going to someday be a film.

KMD: Oh, wow.

MP: But I thought, oh, God, what a drag. First I have to make it a play, then I've got to make it a film. Another thing for me to do. So, [I] did the play, worked on it, workshopped it. That play was my Rockefeller residency project.

KMD: In Santa Barbara.

MP: UC Santa Barbara, yes. And I had been—after I had completed, that was 2004—I just kept talking about, I'm going to turn it into a film. I just kept talking about it and talking about it. I had shared this with other people, and they would always approach me and say, "Hey, so, are you working on that film?" And I would say, "No, not yet. I just don't have the time." Last year, 2006, I connected with a very dear friend, an artist named Cristina Nava, who I helped her create her one-person show, *Rocks in My Salsa*. And she has also been very slowly getting into the film industry, and she was always on my back. "Monica, when are you going to do that, [turn] the play into a screenplay? You've got to do it now, now's the time." So finally, in May of 2007, I find out that GLAAD, the organization called GLAAD [Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation] in Los Angeles, they were offering a screenwriting course for LGBT Latinos. And that would be me—queer, LGBT Latinos. That's me.

And so I applied—you know, you had to submit why you should be in the class, and you were going to be picked. So I got picked, and so this class just came at such a perfect time. It was this six-week course. And throughout the six-week course, we were talking about a project that we wanted to work on, and *Sweet Peace*, the play that's now the film, was my project. And it just—it was just the right timing. And so from that, I got something—inspiration. And also for this year, I was selected to be part of the Macondo Writers' Workshop that Sandra Cisneros founded, and for my thing that I wanted to workshop, I submitted twenty-five pages of the film *Sweet Peace*, thank you very much. And so I have just returned from Macondo, and I am gung-ho because I've got some really excellent feedback—greatly inspired. So that's my goal, I have to crank out this screenplay, before—at the end of August, school starts for me, I'm teaching at Loyola Marymount University. So that's why I need to do it now.

KMD: You mentioned that your work has always been—your performance work has always been filmic. Could you help me understand what you mean by that so I can see this connection? Or maybe there is no other connection other than that, filmic performance thing in film.

MP: I just think—I’ve always been very visual, when you read my work that’s published, even that one-person show, you read it, it’s very visual. You read my short stories—very visual. You can see a short film. I’ve often got told that, even before I was thinking that it was filmic, people were saying, “Your work’s pretty filmic.” So it just felt like destiny for me to do it. And also, writing dialogue is—I love writing dialogue, it’s so fun. It’s so fun. Basically, I am Sibyl, in my head. And I like it. I don’t ever have writer’s block.

KMD: Really?

MP: There’s just too much going on in my head to have that. So dialogue was always a fun thing. Even in my early writing career, when I was a teenager writing the short stories, the dialogue was always fun. So it just wasn’t that—really, I want to immerse in film writing. And then I opened my big mouth and I said I wanted to direct it and produce it as well, because if I don’t do it, who’s going to do it? I’m going to work my ass off and then it’s going to get shelved? No. And my friend, Cristina Nava, let me know—she said, “I want to produce it somehow, someday, so finish it, so we can start getting the money.”

KMD: Much of the work that I know that you’ve done, your performance work, is autobiographical in nature. Is *Sweet Peace* that way too?

MP: I have a Chicano lesbian couple—the main character, I guess maybe the main character could be me. She’s, you know, strong, independent, a femme-y butch. You know, kind of like me.

KMD: All the things you like about yourself, at least. [*laughter*]

MP: Yeah. [*laughter*] And she has this great relationship with her father, and I had this really loving relationship with my father. So I’m taking bits and pieces of what I’ve experienced and what I’ve seen, and I’m making this into a story. And what I loved, the big feedback that I got from my writer’s workshop, was that Alex Espinoza, this wonderful author, he said, “What I like about your characters is they’re very dignified.” And to me, that was—that really made me feel great about my writing, that he was able to tell me that. He used the word “dignified” characters, and I thought—dignified Chicano characters on-screen. Whew, okay. It’s about time.

KMD: Yeah. I think your work has been that way from the beginning, though. I mean, you know—we’re having a good time watching and enjoying and laughing, but there’s a certain kind of dignity for each of the personas you’ve brought to [the] stage.

MP: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I always want to promote strong characters: three-dimensional characters, complex characters. Because too often, when I was growing up, on-screen—just the buffoon Latino, or the Latina who—the Latina who didn’t say anything. They just stayed in the background.

KMD: Do you remember that? Are there characters you recall from—

MP: Yeah, I mean, I just—well, I will speak in this regard. When I first got to LA in ’87, and I—I don’t even know how I got auditions, but I got these auditions, and they were always for the maid. And I would get calls from the casting director saying, “Oh, we got this role, but it’s for the maid, but she’s really a part of the family.” Then I would go and do these auditions, and the maid would say things like, [*exaggerated Latina accent*] “Uh, would you like some more Kool-Aid? Hey, I can bring you some tacos and . . .” And you had to have that really hard-core type of an accent, and it was just really frustrating.

KMD: Did you do it to make a living? Did you do it, or—

MP: I never did those.

KMD: You never did those.

MP: I never, ’cause my auditions were weak, because I wasn’t—

KMD: You didn’t believe it.

MP: I didn’t believe it.

KMD: I wouldn’t believe it either. [*laughter*]

MP: And I don't consider myself an actor. I never considered myself an actor. I never had the desire to read and become other people. I wanted to write it, and I wanted to perform it. These were going to be my stories, and if I did make up characters, they came from me. So, yeah, I was never going to be that good actor. That's why going to these auditions that really humiliated me, I found, gave me the strength to come to terms that I was going to create my own work on my own terms and have people come into my space, as opposed to me jumping through the Hollywood hoops, which you can do. And if you can do that, I think that's great. If you can jump through those hoops and grow tough skin, right on. More power to you. But that wasn't for me. So it made sense to me, and it was important to me, that I wanted to create characters that I could connect with, that I never saw onscreen when I was growing up. The fact that these women are Chicana women, and I—since I'm going to be making this film, I am going to do my best to seek Chicana actresses to play these parts. I just want it to be super authentic, and I want to see my vision—I want to see my artistic vision onscreen.

KMD: So this is—I mean, the play, then the film, will be actually a leap for you, if more of the time you've been telling your story from your life experience.

MP: Yes.

KMD: Where'd you find inspiration for that?

MP: I just think—just life in general, experiencing life, the challenges. Really listening to other people's stories, how things work for them. I watch lots of films. I'm always watching too many films. And just seeing the story unfold and how you tell a story onscreen, how that can be done through images, the importance of—I think it helps—I think it has helped that I've—that dialogue has been easy for me to write, that I can think about—I can go outside myself. I'll use myself as a starting point and the jumping off point, but then just putting myself—because when I'm writing these stories, I actually—if there was a video of me writing, you would see me act out each scene. You would see me be the main character and the side character. The person yelling, the person not yelling. The person crying and the person not crying. I just put myself in that situation. "Okay, how can I make this real? That doesn't seem real to me. She would say this—no, she wouldn't say this."

KMD: Do you do that with your other—I'm trying to get a sense of if there's a difference between this creative moment and this creative process, and your monologues.

MP: My monologues?

KMD: Yeah.

MP: Yeah. Actually, my monologues—one of my favorite ones that I've done of late is me going to get a mammogram. And I took that whole experience, and that whole—where you physically—where the woman actually touches your breasts, and hoists—she has to hoist it onto the plate, and she's lowering the other plate on top of it, and she's adjusting your breast—I took that whole thing, and it's a—it's a routine now.

KMD: But as you're creating it, you're moving through it, the way you're talking about doing these—

MP: Yes. Yes, yes. How it has happened to me is—I have to walk through the first—

KMD: You physically—

MP: I have to physically walk through my bits, as we call them in the comedy world. I've called it that from the very beginning—the performance of it all. Yes, I have to walk through it. I have to do the whole thing to make it work, to make it become real. Because if it works for me—if it works for me by myself—and I'm going through the whole movement, I'm going, "You know what? I think I'm going to be able to get this across to the audience." I just can't be at my computer writing all this stuff down. I have to physically go through it.

KMD: So are you tape recording? I'm just curious, the process—the creative process.

MP: No. No, I speak—I should be tape recording, I know. And I should carry a little journal. I don't. No, I just verbally talk it. And then I sit down and I just quickly, as quickly as I can, write it. And then I get up, and I go through it. So I'm—the mammogram thing. She grabs the breast, she hoists it—

KMD: Hoists the breast. *[laughter]*

- MP: It's quite funny. I mean, there really should be a videotape of me doing it.
- KMD: Well, yeah, because I can't imagine you've always worked at—now I see a laptop computer, I can't imagine you've always had a laptop computer so—
- MP: No. I would—at the beginning of my career, [in the] early '80s—[use] pen and paper. The Beverly Hillbillies in Spanish—*voy a decir un cuento*. [laughter] Yeah, and it just stays in my brain.
- KMD: The movement, the sound, the emotion.
- MP: It stays in my brain, yeah. And the bottom line is, if it feels good to me, and if it feels funny to me, I am more than certain that I'm going to make the audience feel the funny and the fun of it.
- KMD: That's an incredible sense of confidence that I find really admirable, yeah. That's great.
- MP: You should can that, in a can!
- KMD: Or you should at least remember that you've got that. [laughter] Has it ever failed you?
- MP: Yes. In my early years. When you're testing—there was this little bit that I—I never said it right. I never—I'd go, "Why is this not working?" It was quirky and funny to me, but it didn't come across. It didn't come across. And for me, I think it was—my confidence wasn't 100 percent.
- KMD: Do you want to tell me what it is, or . . .
- MP: I'm trying to think. Oh, I think it was this thing where I said, "Oh, you know how when you go out on a date, and you stay overnight? Yeah—sometimes you surprise even yourself. But your date has to go to work at seven o'clock in the morning, and you're thinking, 'Date, why didn't you tell me this before?' But she or he says, 'Hey, stay as long as you want. Help yourself to whatever. And don't forget to shut the door because it locks by itself.' But you, you can't go back to sleep, so you decide to leave. And you don't take a shower, because you want to keep that love-hangover funk. So you're totally disheveled. You look—oh, you look bad. You go home, you open the door, and your friends give you a surprise birthday party. Don't you hate that? I hate that, and that always happens to me." And for the longest time, that's what it was, and nobody really—there was a couple of chuckles in the back, but it just killed me. It just—it just cracked me up. So finally—I think it took about three years that I would do it off and on, off and on, and finally I just—one day just said it. And I'm remember being so relaxed, and I didn't give a shit, and usually—my rule of thumb is, when you don't give a shit, it just—you're just super comfortable.
- KMD: Right, you're there.
- MP: And things work. And it finally worked. It finally worked. But I remember just trying—
- KMD: So most of the time, this is a really good—your sense of what's funny, what's working.
- MP: Oh, yeah. I think I'm pretty much—
- KMD: What's real.
- MP: I think I'm pretty much the queen of funny when I'm trying to teach that to other people. I go, "No. That's the wrong setup. You're not saying—you're adding too many words. Don't add those words. You want to use—these five words, in this order—say it like that. Trust me, it's going to work." Sure enough, it works. But I think that's from me observing—watching a lot of television, watching a lot of performance on television.
- KMD: That's obviously something that's going to help you in creating play and theater and film, right? I mean, being able to get from others what you want.
- MP: Yeah. And when I did my play, I hired a theater director, because I had never directed a play. And I learned a lot from him, and I should have—after looking back, I should have just done it myself. I should have just done it myself because the script was exactly what I wanted it to be, and I found that out through this process of watching, and knowing that the script could stand alone. But I didn't know that at the time, so I hired this one gentleman, who—like I said, I learned a lot from him But what it taught me was, I can direct. I can direct a play, and I know that I can direct a film. If I've written it. Why wouldn't I? I'm going to have to definitely hire tutors, people on the side to—but I have a very specific—
- KMD: Yeah, help me understand—these are very different—I mean, monologue is extremely different from play, and then play is not the same thing as film.

MP: Correct.

KMD: You've got angles involved, not just multiple people speaking, but angles and—

MP: Right, right. And I've just—when I watch film, I just always—I mean, I went to film school. I was told about camera angles, and the importance of it, and why you use them, what it creates if you have a low angle—it's chaos, and their world is upside down—various things. So that makes sense. So now when I watch film, I'm going, "Camera angle. They said this one word with this camera angle, okay. The lighting is like that." I'm completely—I just dissect every shot. That's what I'm doing now. If I am indeed going to be the director, I've got to know what I'm doing.

KMD: Were you doing that before you engaged on this?

MP: Yes, I was, in a more casual way. Yes, definitely I was.

KMD: Even if it was part of your training?

MP: Yes. Yes.

KMD: Just taught you to look at the things that way?

MP: Yeah. And I was always—before I even knew that I was going to be in love with film, as a child looking at photographs—looking at film, just seeing everything that was in the frame, just looking at things a little bit longer than, say, somebody else. Just say, "Oh, okay." The costumes that they're wearing, the colors that they have. "Oh, the color's kind of blending in. Oh, I get it. Okay." So then I go to film school, and they really tell me why these amazing directors used certain costumes and certain lighting and certain camera angles. So now, in the last five years, it's just been self-taught, it's just been — "Okay, why did that happen?" And knowing that film is so damn expensive. Everything on the screen is there for a reason. There's no accident.

KMD: Did it inform your monologue work, then? This film training? Did it influence—I mean, people said you were filmic, but what about the performance of the—you know, were you thinking: angle, shot, bit, scene?

MP: I think I—well, I will just say this. When I first started film school, my dreams were filmic. Camera—the angle, pan, tilt, spin.

KMD: Wow, really?

MP: Yeah.

KMD: Your dream world was using—

MP: I understood it. It was as a teenager, and I'm watching comedians perform on the TV, going like, "Oh, I understand that. Oh, okay. You hold the microphone that way. Okay, he's pausing, or she's pausing, and they're laughing. Okay. It's about timing. It's about timing." It made sense to me, so really getting the information about film and camera angles made sense to me—I was dreaming as if I was the camera.

KMD: Oh, okay.

MP: This will come in handy someday.

KMD: When were you aware of that? Or were you just always like, that's just the way people dream?

MP: I think it was very obvious to me after I started a month of film school. Maybe it was there, but it was very evident to me. I go, "Oh, these are camera angles. Note to self: camera angles."

KMD: Zooming—did it fade to black, your dreams? *[laughter]*

MP: Yeah. I mean, yeah. It had—it was all there. And—

KMD: Do you have any favorite movies?

MP: Oh, my gosh. I have tons. A movie of late that I saw a lot, because I was looking for more story structure, it was *Lantana*, it came out in 2002, I believe. [The film was released in 2001—ed.] Excellent. It starts off with—the opening scene is a pretty shrub with flowers on it. You go, "Oh, pretty shrubs with flowers. This is going to be a pretty shrubs with flowers movie." And then the camera goes into the shrubbery, and you're going, "Wait a minute. I'm kind of feeling a little creepy." And then we see a woman's dead body, and it looks like a painting. It's beautiful. But she's all messed up and stuff, [and] you go, "How did that happen?" And then the story unfolds. And it's just clever. It's clever. And I found out that that was once a play, it was adapted from a play. So I go, "Oh, no wonder why I love this movie." It's about relationships and the complexity of relationships, but the way it's done on film is just—it's a great learning film.

KMD: And that's the main story of *Sweet Peace*, relationships?

MP: Um—is it the main story? Yeah, yeah. Relationships—yeah, I guess so. I guess that could be said, definitely.

KMD: Well, you had something else in mind. What did you have in mind?

MP: Well, how this story started was, I took this Master of Playwriting class with Paula Vogel, and one of the things she told us was that you can write a play when it starts out one way and then it just spins around into something else. Catches the character off their feet. “Oh, that’s what I wanted to do.” And also, I didn’t want to write another comedy by Monica Palacios. I wanted to write something complex. I wanted to write a drama. I wanted to show people that I could do that, I wasn’t just—

KMD: Why do you say, “another comedy by Monica Palacios”?

MP: Because I crank out comedy. That’s easier for me to do. I’ve always done that, and people expect that from me. So I wanted to challenge myself. Here I was, taking this once-in-a-lifetime course with Paula Vogel. I thought, “I want to get my money’s worth,” even though it was free, thank you very much. I challenged myself, and she said—this was on a Thursday night, and she said, “I want you to come back tomorrow with ten pages of a new play. Do it. Go home. Do it.” And what had been in my mind was—I live in Venice Beach, and Lincoln Boulevard can be a seedy boulevard. Prostitutes and people of the night. And I would see these motels that would say “Adult Motels, Rooms By the Hour.” So I would drive by there and go, “What kind of people would go to those motels?” Ah, story.

KMD: That’s when it came to you, huh?

MP: That’s when it came to me. I wanted to do something that I hadn’t done before, and I really wanted to go to the other—

KMD: Well, I guess you are—I mean, just the genre itself, you’re going to the other end.

MP: So that’s where I got the inspiration. And then I put it away. I cranked out those ten pages for her, and then I just put it away. I wasn’t into it. And then I brought it out [again] in 2001, and I started writing. And then it just got a life of its own, and it grew.

KMD: Did you have the whole narrative, the whole story from the beginning, or did it—like you’re saying, when you say “grew,” did you mean that part of it grew too, or . . .

MP: Yeah. Yeah, the whole thing. Because all I just knew was, we start with this Chicana lesbian couple. They’re at this seedy motel, just because they want to have raunchy sex and they need the environment. So they’re minding their own business, having a great time. The characters are named Paz and Dulce, and Dulce has this great orgasm, and she knocks the lamp—the funky little lamp—onto the floor. It crashes, and it shorts out—being that it’s a funky motel, the complex goes black. And they’re just cracking up about it. “Oh, my God, my orgasm caused a blackout.”

So then, Dulce tells her lover, Paz, “Go to the motel manager’s office and tell him to turn the lights back on, because I don’t want him—I don’t want that creepy guy walking back here later, because I know that he probably will.” She goes, “Okay.” So she grabs the Mag flashlight because they brought it as part of their little sex prop show that they do. She brings—she has a black Mag flashlight. She goes to the manager’s office, and she walks in there. “Hello, hello?” No response. She goes behind the counter, no response. She goes—there’s a room behind the counter, and she sees these three televisions and some other stuff. She’s looking around. The lights come back on. When the lights come back on, one of the televisions, it goes on, and she sees her girlfriend getting dressed.

KMD: Ooh.

MP: Yeah. The creepy guy was watching them. So she’s just—she’s grossed out, she’s pissed, she’s everything. She can’t even talk. She’s foaming at the mouth. Just then the guy walks in, and he’s freaked out. He goes, “What are you doing there?” She says, “What do you mean? What [am] I doing here, you fucking piece of shit, what are you talking about?” She can’t even speak, she’s just so pissed off. She reaches for the phone. By this time, he has gone behind the counter. He gets this little funky little gun, he pulls a gun out on her. He [says], “Don’t call the cops.” She’s [replies], “What, are you going to shoot me now, asshole? What are you doing?” At this point, we see Dulce—it cuts back to Dulce, and she’s coming out. She’s gotten

her clothes on. She's coming out, she's closing the door of their room. And as she's closing the door, off-screen—we see her, and the off-screen voice is that guy, and the guy says, “Dulce, why did you come here? Bad people come here. Rooms by the hour. Didn't you read the signs?” Next.

So then we go back to Paz and the guy, and they're back and forth talking, and he's sweating too. He doesn't want to be there. He's shaking. And just then, Dulce walks in—doesn't even know what she's walking into. She just walks into the thing because she's telling her girlfriend to get her something. The guy freaks out, he grabs her like he's going to—I don't know, is he going to—[take her] hostage? He doesn't. Paz—her instinct just—she jumps on the guy and they all fall down, and she starts to hit the guy with the flashlight. And then Dulce's trying to get her off. And then all of the sudden, she's [yelling], “Stop! Stop hitting him!” The guy's dead. So this fun little raunchy sex date—

KMD: Turns into disaster.

MP: Yeah. So—and that's how it starts. And that's what I knew—

KMD: From the beginning.

MP: From the beginning.

KMD: That first ten pages?

MP: Yes. That's what I knew. And then I just let it go. “Well, why were they—how did they deal with this?”

KMD: Do you go backward then?

MP: Yeah. She has—what happens is, she decides they're going to take the body and bury it in the town of Blythe. Blythe is [on] the border of California and Arizona. And she knows about the town of Blythe because when she was little, when she was ten, her and her father would go there during the summer to help their *compadre*, Ramón, build his house. So now, she's using these little sweet flashbacks of her childhood to get her through this horrible present. And so she's—the flashbacks and the present—and how they deal. And so as they're traveling on the road now with a dead body in the back, she gets a call from her mom, twelve thirty at night. She's [saying], “Oh, fuck. I don't want to answer it.” She answers it, and she finds out that her dad just had a heart attack. So that's what they're dealing with.

KMD: What a great story. [*laughter*]

MP: Thank you.

KMD: I want to know more.

MP: Yeah, so that's the film.

KMD: But it's really—you're right, you've gone a completely different route.

MP: Yeah, you know, I just—

KMD: I mean, I'm—I know a little bit about theater, so I'm going to treat how you handled it in the theatrical sense, but it certainly—it could be done in film.

MP: Yeah. I mean, I just knew when I wrote those first ten pages, I thought, “Oh, God. I'm going to have to eventually make this a screenplay.” But it was just—I keep using the word “filmic.” I just saw the images, I just saw it.

KMD: Well, it can work onstage, but it's complicated when you have different sets at the same time, unless you use the technique of, you know, you light this then the lights [go] there—

MP: What we did there to put it on the stage was lighting. A lot of it was just, you know, present-day lighting, and then change the flashback. When she walks in from the present day, she walks—and that's when the theater director really was a big help. A lot of times, they were in the car, and he goes, “We have to get them out of the car, so let's do this.” “Oh.” Didn't think about it. So I love that. I love when somebody really explores my work, and they take it to a different place. I love that.

KMD: But I would imagine that's a new thing for you.

MP: Yeah.

KMD: Because most people don't redo somebody else's comic stand-up routine or performance art, do they?

MP: They could, but that's—no, I never—no. I wrote all my stuff. All my comedy was me.

KMD: Right. But nobody's ever asked to do your stuff themselves.

MP: Um, did somebody? I think maybe I've had some people.

KMD: Really?

MP: Maybe. I think. And one of my students did some of my stuff onstage once. She goes, "You mind if I do . . .?" I go, "No, please. Your interpretation." And I enjoyed it, it was fun. It was fun to watch that. But yeah, I just—I just want to be able to collaborate, because for so long I didn't.

KMD: Yeah, that's the other major difference.

MP: I was by myself.

KMD: It's a team effort, if you do it this way.

MP: I was by myself. It was really easy. If I messed up, it was my fault. But now, as I'm—I'm just, I'm older. I want to do different things. I want to explore different avenues. And I know that filmmaking is super collaborative. And if you don't have those skills, then you can't make a film because you are dependent on a lot of people. A lot of people. So—

KMD: I'm just thinking, the scene you described, how it's easier to do in film than it is onstage.

MP: Yes.

KMD: I mean, lighting is one thing, but if you do the lighting badly in the theater, it's going to look like—

MP: Schlocky.

KMD: Schlocky.

MP: Yeah.

KMD: Like amateuristic.

MP: Yes. Yes.

KMD: And you can avoid all that in film.

MP: Yes. Yeah. So it's been—yesterday, I go, "Oh, God, I don't want to run out these camera angles. Can't I just . . .?" "No. Do it."

KMD: Now, you were saying, we started this conversation with you going through—I mean, I want to say Brechtian, because it's like you're taking on each one of those characters and you're doing those parts. So do you also, when you're doing them, [are you] thinking camera angles, or do you go back and write that in?

MP: I think I am writing it thinking camera angles. But I also go back. I try to get the story out as quickly as I can, just because I don't want to. I'm trying to do that thing where, "Write a Screenplay in Twenty-One Days!" I'm trying to do that, because you should, you should train yourself to just crank it out. Crank out the story, and then go back and enhance it and put those camera angles—

KMD: In this case, you have the story because you made it as a play.

MP: Yes, but it wasn't a three-act play. And in a screenplay, you have to have a three-act story. That's how it works. But—you know, you can do your little experimental thing, but for that universal appeal, and people to—

KMD: Can I get you to go back a little bit?

MP: Yes.

KMD: The work you've done before, you've done many whole evening events that were monologue.

MP: Yes. Yeah, my one-person shows. I'm usually the one-hour gal, the sixty, sixty-five minute, maybe seventy minute show—that's me.

KMD: Do you feel like this prepares you for a play and the screenplay, or . . .

MP: Yeah, I do, because I know—I mean, I've been a self-producing artist since day one. So, you know, I think mentally—emotionally—I'm preparing myself for, "This is going to be a lot of work, man." You might die because of making this film. I know, but at least I'll have a film. I'll need my nieces and nephews to carry on, because I'm going to—I can't have no kids, I'm not going to have no kids. Yeah, I do feel that being the self-produced, independent artist definitely has, "Okay, I've been doing the work." And doing that ten month residency, Rockefeller, where I finished writing a play. I workshopped the play, I found the actors for the play, I designed the set—I didn't make the set, I designed the set. I did all that shit. I did it all, and

I lived. And after, I thought, “You know what? I’m going to be able to make a film, then. If I did this and I survived, and I got a little award out of it from the city of Santa Barbara—okay. I’m going to do it. It’s going to be hard work, but I can do it. And I’m going to direct it. Okay.” So—

KMD: You don’t sound like you’re convincing yourself, do you?

MP: The thing that I keep hearing from filmmakers is—yeah, just do it. Just keep moving, moving forward. Don’t think about it because it’s so overwhelming. If you sit and you think about the money aspect, forget it. You’re never going to make it. You’re not going to even move out of your chair.

KMD: Right. Get the story done.

MP: I have to raise a million dollars? You mean two million? The gentleman who I took the class from the summer, Carlos Portugal, he put together his first feature, it came out in 2006. It’s called *East Side Story*. And it’s a Latino boy gets Latino boy type of story. And he told us that he did that for—I think for—I think this was the correct amount, I think he said one hundred eighteen thousand dollars. Which is nothing. It’s zero dollars. Zero. If it’s not that amount, it’s some other amount very close to that. And he said, “I just wanted—I had been wanting to do it.” And he told us that by the time [he got] the idea to writing it, and then filming, it took him eleven months. Eleven months. That is unbelievable. That’s crazy. That’s a lot of coffee and energy drinks. But it just inspired me. “God, he did it.” He really wanted to do it. He did it. He put up his—mortgaged his house and somebody else’s house, and he called in a lot of favors. People had owed him some favors, and so he went calling. A lot of people did things for free.

KMD: So your plan is probably to get this screenplay—the script done, and then go take that next class on—or did you already have that training? You know, what it takes to produce.

MP: I don’t know if I’m going to take the next class. I think I’m just going to run with it. My friend, Cristina, she seemed definite that she wanted to produce it, and she—the last four months—her and her boyfriend cranked out a ten minute film that was his UCLA thesis project, and I helped him on the production of it—running around for them. But—so she’s made some connections, and has talked to many filmmakers, and what they tell her, “Forget it, just do it. Just finish the script. Get it nice and tight. Get the script as best you can. And just start figuring it out. The money will come.” “It will? Okay.” Because that’s it. She continues to hear it, “Don’t think about it, don’t think about the work,” because it’s just overwhelming. They’re going to probably want to just—if you want to do it, you’re going to do it. Try to find your cinematographer—try to find the people that you want to work with. That was the next big thing.

KMD: Oh, okay. The people you want to work with. But the—in terms of a career in the arts, there’s not a lot of—it’s not like you sell your work. In the visual arts, you can sell [to] a dealer, or if you get lucky, even if it’s a community-based organization, you’re selling. So what does a performance artist make their buck on?

MP: Their bodies.

KMD: The box office sales and that’s it?

MP: They sell their—

KMD: The performer?

MP: I’ve—I made my money off of doing performances.

KMD: Yeah, that’s what I mean, the box office sales.

MP: Somebody hires me, depending on what kind of deal I strike with them—that’s how it has been for me. If I had a secretary, a hot secretary, somebody helping me, maybe perhaps I could crank out merchandise. If I was sort of, “Oh, if only I had this type of merchandise.” I know a lot of people make their money off of that. But, you know, I don’t even—I barely have a Web site. I barely put my little film—my performance on YouTube. It’s hard work. It’s a hard thing to maintain, to keep your name and your body out there, that you’re, “I’m for sale. Hi, I’m for sale!”

KMD: Have you seen the change over the—I mean, you’ve been performing for over twenty years—have you seen a change with, like, the deal you get with the theater, for the performance? Or is it still—

MP: What do you mean? What—

- KMD:** Um—you know, first you got a third of the box office cut, and now, you get half. You do have a name now, so—
- MP:** Right. I make money when I go perform at universities.
- KMD:** Oh, that's more than Highways or something like that?
- MP:** Oh, yeah. A venue like Highways, which is—it's a great, fifty people, it's a great venue, but they do—it's fifty-fifty. They get 50 [percent] you get 50, but you kind of get less than 50. But the thing is, you walk into Highways: they have lights, they have a sound system, they have somebody to run your show. You don't have to hire anybody unless you need that extra—you just walk in there. You have everything there ready to go. So they take a good chunk of the door? Yeah, I mean, I could see it. But yeah—but I'm the show. So that's good. Whereas other venues in LA, you have to rent it, and they want—when I was doing my research ten years ago on venues in LA, they wanted, “Yeah, I want to do a run for two weeks.” “Well, we need four thousand dollars right up front.” I don't have four thousand dollars up front. “Do you have insurance?” “No.” “Well, you have to get insurance.” “I do? Shoot.” Yeah, self-producing's expensive, so that's why, when somebody says, “We want to hire you,” [I] just show up. Like universities—I am there. That's where it comes from.
- KMD:** And you've been performing at many institutions. You've done almost everything in Southern California, right?
- MP:** Yeah. Yeah, I work more out—away from LA than I do in LA. I don't know, LA has its reputation of not really honoring their own people. I don't know why that is, but—it's not just me. I'm not taking it personally. I know other—it's really hard to do a show and get a lot of promotion here. When out-of-towners come to LA, [there's] great promotion for them. And then you try to work your ass off thinking you have connections with certain papers and certain people, “Can you please print my photo?” Yet they print another photo of Bruce Willis, because he needs the promotion badly. So yeah, it's—that's why I—[if I were] younger, I would write the show—flier the town with my fliers, get there to the venue, do the lights—
- KMD:** Did you?
- MP:** And then do the show.
- KMD:** You did.
- MP:** That was the younger me. But now, I can't do that. I don't want to do that. I just want to show up and do my work. I don't want to run so ragged that my performance is weak. I don't want to do that. So I jump at those chances of getting hired at various universities.
- KMD:** Do—and those connections are coming from—scholars who are using your work in the classroom?
- MP:** Various. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. I think that's how it's been of late. Scholars, professors [who] know my work. They will have various series that I can be a part of. Because I can—I fall under so many categories: Chicano and queer, theater, ethnic studies, all that. You name it, I'm a conference. Got a conference you want? I'll do that for you. People of color—you have a people of color show? I've got that.
- KMD:** I've got that. *[laughter]*
- MP:** Whatever you want. Yeah.
- KMD:** And when they're asking you, they know you mostly as Monica Palacios, the performance artist—
- MP:** The writer/performer. That's how they know me, that's how they know my work.
- KMD:** Do most—do some—any of them know you through your founding of Culture Clash?
- MP:** They do, and they're always shocked. People are always shocked to find out that I was part of Culture Clash. “Really? You and Marga Gomez? Huh?” They kind of scratch their head. Just can't really fathom—
- KMD:** Well, you weren't just part of it. You founded it.
- MP:** Yeah.
- KMD:** Do you want to talk about that?
- MP:** Um . . . Okay. *[laughter]*
- KMD:** *[laughter]* She says reluctantly, as the camera pans around the other side of her face, right?
- MP:** Spins. The camera spins around to show the character's reluctance.
- KMD:** Angst. *[laughter]*

MP: Frustration. *[laughter]* Okay. Ask me some questions so I can get into it.

KMD: How did it start? Why did you start that? What were some of the reasons?

MP: Well, I—I didn't start that. I was minding my own business. I was happy with my performing self, and performing with Marga Gomez. And René Yañez, from the Galería de la Raza—he saw my work, and loved my work. And he expressed to me, in his René fashion, “Hey, man, you know what? I could see a troupe, you and Marga and some guys. I want you to meet these guys!” And I reply, “René, I don't really want to work with guys. I don't really need to work—I'm fine doing what I want to do.” But he was just really persistent. He goes, “No, it's never been done before, man! Come on, I can really see it!” And as this curator of the gallery, he always wanted to do different things, new things. Cutting edge. That was his thing, and I really—I liked that about him, really loved that about him. So I said, “Okay.” I talked with Marga. I said, “Do you really want to do it? I'll just do it if you do it. You want to do it? Okay, I'll do it if you do it.” So it was one of those.

So Richard Montoya, who I had seen as part of René's installations, I forget what it was called. And I saw him do his work, and I thought, “Okay, interesting.” And then I had met [José] Antonio Burciaga, and I liked him very much. He was a father figure for me. And very funny, dry humor. [I] really enjoyed him. So I thought, “Okay. What the hell, all right. Let's do it.” And we'll do it on Cinco de Mayo, “Okay. We'll do it.” So—I mean, [I was] reluctant the whole way, but—and then towards—maybe a week before it was going to go on, René had corralled Herbert Siguenza, and I didn't—I had never heard of him. He goes, “Yeah, because he does these characters like Michael Jackson and Julio Iglesias, yeah.” I'm going, “That's a drag queen thing. Is he a gay guy?” “No, but see, he does these . . . I'm [thinking], “Okay, yeah, whatever.” Again, “Why am I doing this?” And then [at] the very end, maybe a few days before, René's [saying], “Yeah, we need a rapper, because that's what's happening now. Kids want to see rappers. Yeah, I know this guy, Ricardo Salinas, he's this rapper guy. I think he would really be really good.” Okay, here we are. Two women and four—three guys?

KMD: Four guys.

MP: Four guys? I was [thinking], four guys? Okay, well, one-shot deal. All right. “How much am I going to get paid?” So—[we] publicized the one show, and it either sold out, or it just gained so much damn attention, it was [as if] this fire had started—we had to add another show. And mind you, it's a small—the venue is really small, but I think you could cram at least eighty people in there. So—he does, “Hey, you guys, we're going to do another show. Is that okay? Whether you like it or not?” So this thing that I really didn't want to do just, boom, just this big life unto itself. And we did this show, and what we did, we were thinking, “Wouldn't it be cool if we could have done this sketch comedy?” but there was no time for it. So we just did self-contained individual things. And the audience just ate it up.

KMD: And did René orchestrate, curate, who would come on first, second, third? Or was that—

MP: I'm going to say—maybe he did, but probably Marga and I—we were the veterans. We had been performing, we had been producing, we had been doing all that stuff. I think we had a lot of input as far as how things should go, to make it a good, full, interesting show. I think I would have gotten all pissed off, saying, “Excuse me, that's not going to work,” the bossy chick that I am. So we did it, and after the first show, the energy of it was really—it was really amazing, that's for sure. And then we did the second show, again another great, great show. But for me, I thought, “Okay, good. It's over. Okay, I can go back to my life now. Whew.” But no, no. People were [asking], “This is going to happen again, right? You guys are going to go on tour, right? You're doing this forever, for the rest of your life, right?” “No, not really.” And then before we could say no, people had already booked us for other events, and so it's just—boom, it just took off.

And so what was happening, what I was seeing was that, you know, here I was, performing mostly for a queer audience. Now I had been branched out into more mainstream—still alternative, that's where the venue was. And René's friends were always these trippy artist-type people. They weren't just regular mainstream comedy club people. So that was interesting, the mix of people that would come and see us.

KMD: What was the venue again for the first—

MP: Galería de la Raza.

KMD: It was that Galería.

MP: Yes. Twenty-Fourth Street Studio. It was Twenty-Fourth Street Studio slash Galería de la Raza. I think that's what—

KMD: How did you get all those people in there?

MP: Crammed them. Crammed them.

KMD: I was assuming it was down the street at the Mission Cultural Center [for Latino Arts].

MP: No.

KMD: No.

MP: No, it was in that little small, small, small space. No ventilation.

KMD: And was it—when did it get the name Culture Clash? When did you start doing skits?

MP: We never did skits. When I was involved, when Marga and I were involved, there were never skits. Skits—I don't remember that. Because they always wanted to make . . . And we'd have these little meetings with the boys, and they would suggest these really—what's the word?—silly, not to my liking, sketches. And so we would always [say], "No. That's not funny, you guys." "I know! Why don't you guys come out pregnant, and then the guys . . ." It's like, "Oh, no. Not coming out pregnant. It's not going to happen." "But it'll be funny!" "No. It's not going to be funny." Yeah, there was talk about sketch work and collaboration. I guess I really can't speak for Marga, but I was always—no, not collaborating. No, [it's] my work.

KMD: But didn't you do stuff with her that was—

MP: Yes, I did stuff with—I think we did—I think that was it, that she and I did stuff together, but we never worked with the guys.

KMD: So how long did that last?

MP: One year. And we would have—I mean, I was done. I was done by the first night, really. I was doing my own thing, happily doing my own thing. I didn't really—I didn't need it. I liked working by myself, and I liked working with Marga. So yeah, they just—they were able to trick us into going for a whole year, and then finally, we just said, "We're done. We're done."

KMD: And when the two of you walked away? The boys—

MP: "The bitches are gone! Party time!"

KMD: The reaction, was the—

MP: I think—no, they really—they wanted us to stay. They wanted us to stay and work things out, but it was just done. That was all. Just time—just time.

KMD: And so all the time you were there, Antonio was part of it, or did he—

MP: Yes. Antonio was a part, yes. Yeah.

KMD: And they were—it was called Culture Clash.

MP: At first it was called Comedy Fiesta, which is a name that Marga and myself used for one of our shows, thank you very much, and then it was just used for this. So, you know—I think we kind of got on René's case about, "We can't be using that. That's our name." And anyway, it doesn't sound [right]. So he came up with Culture Clash. René.

KMD: Oh, René did?

MP: I think maybe a month later? Something like that?

KMD: But the second show was called Culture Clash, is what I—

MP: The second show?

KMD: The second gig they had you do, after Cinco de Mayo.

MP: Oh, it was?

KMD: Didn't you get the name?

MP: Oh. I kind of feel it was like a month later, maybe. I try to block that time in my life out.

KMD: And you're blocking that time because . . .

MP: [laughter] We just had different ideas about what was funny, what was not funny.

KMD: I'm assuming that's not such a big secret, so—

MP: No. Yeah, there was a lot of homophobic remarks said on a regular basis.

KMD: And it's part of the schtick, it's not just said. I mean, that's what I'm saying, it's public—

MP: Right, right.

KMD: That part of their routine is homophobic.

MP: Right, right, right. So I just—I didn't get that. It's like, "Do you guys [know] we're lesbians? Do you guys get that? You're making fun of us, our people?" So, yeah, I didn't want to be part of that. And I really—I would have cut ties a lot earlier, but everybody was insisting that we stay. "No, no, please, you guys, please. You've got to stay, please, please." So. And I will say that feeling the audience's enthusiasm to see this group of people onstage was really—was a turn-on, but we never were very queer onstage with Culture Clash.

KMD: What do you mean?

MP: Because we did mostly Chicano/Latino venues, and they weren't embracing the queer culture. This is the '80s, man. This is when AIDS is raging and queers are at fault for that. Every time we kind of did an inkling of queer stuff [and] nobody fully said that we're lesbians, [but] people are like, "Ew-w," responded negatively. So we were like, "Oh, this is great. This is the first time we're seeing this Latino comedy show." But they never embraced us fully, so that was another drag, that—

KMD: You couldn't be doing what you were doing.

MP: Yeah. It was kind of a typical Latino family. "We know. We know, we know, we know. We don't want to talk about it." I think that's how it was.

KMD: Is that the way your family was?

MP: No. No, my family has been always very embracing of me, and the gaggle of chicks that I have brought into the house.

KMD: *[laughter]*

MP: Oh, yeah. *[laughter]* They've been so—

KMD: What about your sister? You were talking about your sister, so—and her as well?

MP: Yeah, yeah. You know, the people we'd bring home when we were straight and when we were lesbians—very respectful people. Always very respectful of my parents. So that's what my parents expected from us.

KMD: And you knew that that was a different kind of family? I mean, when did that come to your awareness, I guess I should say, that your family was more accepting than other folks?

MP: When I would talk to people and they would tell me how horrible their coming-out was, and how their families said they disowned them. "Really? Wow. That didn't happen to me." People would say, "That's rare. You're very different." I thought, "Whoa, I guess I did have a good upbringing. I guess my family is very loving to me, towards me and to my girlfriends." Yeah.

KMD: So you move away from this troupe, and you continue working with Margo, or—MP: Somewhat, but doing a lot of stuff on my own. It was never to work with somebody, it was just—just happened to be. And then I did some other shows with some other people. But bottom line, I was always a solo performer. That just made sense to me.

KMD: Really?

MP: To be myself. I am a rock, I am an island. Yes. Yeah.

KMD: So where did this crazy idea come from to do a play, a screenplay? That really is a departure then.

MP: Again, not really, because I was—like I said, I had always been writing—

[break in audio]

KMD: We're going on to side B. It's August 9 with Monica Palacios, and she's talking about making dialogue and how the transition was easy for her.

MP: Yes. So I was always doing the dialogue in the short stories, so I had that under my wing. And then when I realized that I could be a stand-up comic, that made sense to me, too. So I was—I had—making work for

the stand-up comic kept the work for the dialogue that I would use later down the line for my plays and my screenplays.

KMD: Now, I've got a really ignorant question to ask you.

MP: Bring it on, mama, bring it on.

KMD: Is there a difference between a stand-up comic, a performance artist, and a—yeah, a stand-up comic and a performing artist?

MP: Yes. Stand-up comic is—you're there—standardly, stand-up comic is performing at a comedy club. People pay a certain amount of money. If not, then they've got to sit down and order a certain amount of drinks. And the mentality of your audience is, "Make me laugh." It's very aggressive. The comedy world that I came from is very aggressive. So it's this challenge, it's competitive. It's competitive with the other comics, and it's competitive with your audience. Well, I would hear people say, "Oh, yeah, I go to comedy clubs because I want to heckle the comics." "You *want* to heckle the comics?" Very aggressive. Very aggressive. Whereas, if you're performing, a writer/performer or a performance artist, you have gotten a space that's your space, people are coming in just to see you. They—the mentality should be, "We're supportive of you, so we're going to come and see you." They're kind of doing this little collective hug with you. Comedy? No. Comedy's not pretty. Comedy's not pretty. And I learned that. I didn't know that. I learned that in the moment.

KMD: Yeah, because you do—

MP: In the moment.

KMD: All of these things then. I guess I'm trying to figure out how you identify as an artist.

MP: Present-day, I still identify with [the] writer/performer. I feel that I've always been a writer first and then the performer. And I still feel true, as I'm going down this filmmaking path, I still feel I'm the writer/performer. And I think when I finish my screenplay, I think I will—

KMD: Have demonstrated that you're the writer.

MP: Yeah, you know? So that's how they're different. Not to say that creating your own space and people coming into your own space is going to be heaven. One show comes to mind where I was doing a run of my first one-person show, called *Latin Lezbo Comic*, at the Celebrity—no, Celebration Theatre, the queer theater of Los Angeles. This was '91. And I think it was a Sunday night, and usually, you know, before the shows, I'm up, I'm getting excited. I'm very nervous, but I'm also very positive, think positively. "I'm number one," jumping around. The lights go up, and I see—there was very many people in the audience. Sunday night, slow night. Maybe there was twenty, maybe. Twenty people out of a sixty-seat theater. So it didn't look that bad.

KMD: Yeah.

MP: But there's four people in the front, and they're all like this, and they're cross-armed, and they're pissed. So did they come to my show because I was going to make them laugh? Did they come to my show because they were pissed off at me? I don't know. I really should have stopped the show and told them, "Your body language and your energy is killing me."

KMD: "Get out."

MP: Yeah. "You need to leave." Or . . . And you know what? I'm going to give everybody their money back, because they really fucked me. I can't go any further. But my mentality has always been, the show must go on, whether you like it or not. I have probably cancelled—in my twenty-five years, I think I have cancelled two shows, because I was literally sick, and I couldn't stand up. But that's—once you make a commitment—sorry, you got to go on. And I learned that the hard way. So I did the show. Here it was. This was my space, my show, my time, thinking I was going to get the love [but] these people were pissed. So why did you come!?! So it just depends. But—and also, stand-up comedy, you're a lineup. Twenty comics, or fifteen comics.

KMD: So obviously you don't prefer that.

MP: No. Never did.

KMD: Does it make more money, though?

MP: You could. You could, if you have—if some club likes you, and they want you as their steady comic, yeah. You’ve got to perform for them like, what, five nights a week, four nights a week? Sure, that could be the deal. But I just—you know, I attempted the mainstream comedy clubs in San Francisco where I started, and that was—never liked it. It was homophobic, it was hard, it was just too aggressive. Racist, sexist. And then when I got down to LA, I really didn’t want to, I didn’t want to go to the comic clubs, but the people that I would meet here and there, they would say, “Oh, but if you want exposure, you need to go to the comedy clubs. And Monica, you’re funny. You’re funnier than—you should have your own sitcom.” They would—put that into my head, “Well, okay, I’ll make it my own sitcom.”

And this one particular time—I was working on the Smoke House Restaurant in Burbank, home of the world-famous garlic bread, and I had my friend pretend she was my agent, and she called the Comedy Store. The Comedy Store is a really big place to get into on the Sunset Strip. She called and she faked it, and she got me a spot for the night. Because otherwise, I would have had to go there at one o’clock, and then they pick you, and then come back at three o’clock and then they pick four, and then come back. It’s just these hoops, they torture you. She got me the spot, but the spot that she got me was number one spot, which just sucks. To go up first, you’re the first comic up for the night—sucks. There’s hardly anybody there, nobody’s drunk. It’s just awful.

KMD: Right, somebody to warm you up—you’re the warm-up.

MP: Awful, awful, awful. So I don’t want to do it, but I keep hearing in the back of my head, “Monica, you’re funnier. You should have a sitcom!” So I dress—I wear a dress that night, because I felt that if I went the femme route that I was going to just—it was going to be better. So I don’t want to go, but I go. And I get there, and a *guido*, the doorman, greets me, and he just jumps—just emotionally and mentally just jumps on me. I just step into the place, he goes, “Hey, what’re you doing here? You can’t be a comic. You’re too pretty! Hey, so, where you from?” I said, “San Francisco.” He said, “San Francisco, so does that mean you’re *gay*?” Less than a minute. Less than a minute. I don’t want to be there, and he just attacks me. And because I needed to feel safe, I said, “No, I’m not gay.” And from that moment on, I just—you know, my self-confidence was just dripping off me, and I was getting smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller. He goes, “Okay, well, you’re going to go on, so—and I’m going to introduce you.” Oh, jeez.

KMD: Great.

MP: So “Guido”, you know, the stereotypical Italian guy: short, stocky, the New York accent—he introduces me, and I go onstage. And by this time, my hearing’s already gone, I just—I’m falling apart. And I get onstage, and I do my Cinderella bit that killed two days ago at this private party. I start it, and people are just—they’re not paying attention to me, or they’re looking at me, and they don’t get me. People are talking, and people are ordering drinks—I don’t exist to them. I’m invisible. It crushed me so badly. I got off the stage. “Thank you very much. Good night.” [I] ran off the stage, I’m sobbing. Called my friend [from a] pay phone—remember, it’s the ’80s—I call my friend, “Come and pick me up. I just had the worst set.” She comes and she gets me, very dear woman.

But what it taught me was, I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to be one of twenty. I don’t want to deal with Guido and his testosterone. I don’t want to deal with that aggressiveness from the audience. I don’t want to put my audience through the two-drink minimum. I want to do my own thing on my own time and my own space. And that’s when I started writing one-person shows. I mean, I was already doing it when I was in San Francisco at the gay venues, but it wasn’t really a full-on show. So that’s what started it. That’s what really—that experience. Which was—you know, it was horrible at the time, but when I tell it, [it] just cracks me up.

KMD: It must have been horrible at the time. It’s making me cringe now. But you said—well, we were talking earlier off-tape that you have a hard time relating to folks who were separatist.

MP: Right.

KMD: That’s a good story, for wanting to be a separatist.

MP: Yeah. And you know, then and still now, male comics dominate the comedy world. Yeah, so I just—those comedy clubs are just so oppressive and so—

KMD: Well, Chicano writers don't dominate Chicano writing. Chicana/Latina—it's Chicana lesbians who dominate, so maybe that's the niche you fit in. I mean, they're leading the troops.

MP: In the—what field are you talking about?

KMD: Writing, creative writing. For creative writing, it's hottest, best stuff that's pushing the envelope comes from Latina lesbians.

MP: Um . . . Okay. But is it—is that mainstream stuff right now? Not really.

KMD: I don't know what you mean by mainstream.

MP: Mainstream. You know—

KMD: Like Sandra?

MP: Yeah.

KMD: Sandra Cisneros gets picked up by a big press—that's mainstream. Circulates a hundred thousand copies. Yeah, that's mainstream.

MP: I don't know any Latina lesbians who are mainstream getting a lot of attention.

KMD: No. Not that identify as a lesbian, no.

MP: Yeah, right. They're in the closet. They're way in the closet. Yeah, so those comedy clubs—yeah, I'm never going to do it. And [the] one time I did—I vowed never to do that comedy setup again. And when I was doing that show, *Latin Lezbo Comic*, I had this professor come to me from Pomona Tech [Cal Poly Pomona], and he liked what I did, and he said, "Oh, you have to come to campus. Students have to see you. You're important." I said, "Oh, I'm important! Well! Okay." He said, "We're going to have the Cinco de Mayo comedy night." And I went, "Oh, that means comedy club mentality." I go, "I don't . . ." He goes, "Please, please, please? The school will pay you, and I'll throw in my money as well." He really wanted me to come.

KMD: Do you remember who that was?

MP: What's his name? [Richard Santillan.] Very sincere, nice man. He just loved my work. So I said, "Okay. It's going to be okay, right?" He goes, "Yeah, yeah. They're ready to hear you. They need to hear you." So I'm thinking, "Stand-up comedy—it's going to be stand-up comedy format. This is '92—not too far. This is not the '62—no, it's '92. So, my girlfriend at the time was Diane, and she came with me. And I get there, and I find out that I'm second to go on.

KMD: You're not the header—

MP: I'm second to go on. It's some guy, me, some other guy, and another guy. So there's four of us. That was fine with me. I didn't mean to be the headliner, I just wanted to go. I didn't really want to do it, so I just wanted to go and get it over with. So this guy comes to me and goes, "Hey, man, do you want to switch?" No—I'm the first to go up, this one particular—I'm the first to go up, and for me, that was fine, because for me—I just wanted to do my thing and leave, get my check and leave. So he comes up to me. He goes, "Hey, you know what? I've got a gig to go to. Do you want to switch? [Right now] I go last, you go first. So I would go first and that [way] you can go last, and you can be the headliner." I said, "Uh, okay." Like a fool, I said okay, thinking people were going to be loose and ready to hear lesbian comedy.

So he switches with me. They start the show. So it's—he goes on, the three other guys go on. And it was—for two hours, or very close to two hours, it was nothing but fag this, fag that, *joto* this. "Hey, do you think there's Latina *jotos*, man? I don't think so. Can you imagine? Hey, kill the fags!" And people are laughing, laughing, laughing. And I'm pacing in the lobby, and my girlfriend is sitting in the audience, and she feels violated. She's like, "Oh, shit." She might even have been crying at one point. But the show must go on. So I'm pacing, and I'm thinking, "Okay, I'm going to go on in a bit." And I poke my head in there, and they're like, "Yeah, *joto*! Kill them!" "Great, great." And I'm thinking to myself, "Okay, okay, okay, Monica. You cannot do any queer stuff, just make it all mainstream. You can allude to it. You don't have to say that you're a lesbian. No, no. He hired you because your voice is important. He wanted them to hear you. Just do what you were hired for. Okay, I'm going to do what I was hired for. I can do it, I can do it." So first of

all, they're laughed-out, they're done. It's too long, too long of a show. So now, the guy, the emcee goes, "Okay, we saved the best for last."

And when they do that—when they say stuff like that, I always have a lousy—it's a guaranteed lousy time. Or when they say, "Uh, she's pretty." When they do that to me, it's always—it's horrible. So he goes, "We saved the best for last, and here she is. Monica Palacios." And I come out there, and I go, "Hey, how you guys doing?" And I could already feel that they were tired, they were done. But they could sense that I was different, that I wasn't this woman who was going to come out and say, "Ladies, does your husband . . .?" They just—I was different to them. And so I do my ten minutes of mainstream Latino stuff where everybody can get it, your grandmother can watch. I go, "Now I'm going to do something a little bit different. I'm going to do an excerpt from my show, *Latin Lezbo Comic*." "Uh . . ." You could hear the audience go, "Uh . . ."

So I just proceeded to do twenty minutes, and they were, "Huh? What?" And they were disgusted. And I felt afraid, and I just kept—people are getting up and walking out, and they were saying things to me and stuff. And these are all—I would have to say, looked like it to me, can't assume, but looked like it was Chicano. Pretty sure. Specifically Chicano. My people, mostly students. Smattering of scholars, five, maybe. So I'm sweating, I just want to be done. I look where Diane is at. I go, "There's Diane, there's the door, where's the guy with the check? Okay. One, two, three—okay. Do it, do it, do it." They kind of started to pay attention, and kind of snickered when I got to "When I bring my wife home to meet the family," and that whole family thing that I do.

KMD: Yeah.

MP: They were kind of understanding that, and, I'm assuming, thinking, "Oh, that's kind of happened—we have one of those in our family, too." So it was kind of making sense now. So then I get to the part where I go, "Thank you very much, goodnight," and they kind of [*slow clapping*] did this, and somebody came up to me, and just said, "Good job"—some people. "Good job, you're brave." Basically, they were saying, "You're brave," but they said, "Good job," shaking hands. I got up, I went over to Diane, got Diane's hand, and she was crying. She was upset. Grabbed her hand, grabbed the check. I go, "Yeah, yeah, thanks a lot, yeah." He says to me, "How'd you feel?" I go, "I got through it. Give me the check." Okay, got the check. We're walking out to my car—we were afraid. We thought people were going to jump on us. Okay, that was '92. That was really, really—a hard thing. And I was supposedly there because they needed to hear me? I don't think they needed to hear me.

KMD: Are you more careful with the gigs you do now?

MP: Yeah. I—it was a stand-up comedy setup. I should have known better. I should have said, "I'll do it, but I'll do my own show there, and you have to advertise me as a queer performer. People have to know that I'm queer." So from that moment on, people would hire me, I'd go, "They know that I'm queer, right? You're going to advertise me like that?" "Yeah." "Okay." And then the last time that was intense was when I got hired at Austin—University of Texas [at] Austin, the open-minded campus. They hired me for a multicultural comedy night. That should have been the tip-off right there: multicultural comedy night.

KMD: That means they had a crisis on their campus and you're coming to sweep it up.

MP: So the guy who hires me is queer, Chicano, and I said, "Oh, but it's a stand-up comedy." He goes, "Yeah, but we needed somebody queer. Please, please, please do it." And I needed the money. So of course, they flew me out there—I needed the money, that was the bottom line. So I get there, and he doesn't pick me up. It's these two girls, these two straight Chicanas pick me up. And I go, "Hey, you guys, I want to do queer stuff tonight. It's all right, right?" They go, "Oh, yeah. Austin, we're so open-minded, yeah, no problem, actually." Doing their little Chicana-speak. Okay. So that was—I passed the test. And then I see somebody else, they take me to the hotel, and I see some other people there. I go, "Hey, you guys, I'm going to do queer stuff tonight, is that going to be okay?" "Oh, yeah. Here in Austin, we're so open-minded. Yeah, no problem. Do it." I rented some—I keep asking the same question: "It's going to be okay, right? It's going to be okay?" "Oh, yeah, no problem."

So I go up, I'm going to go up—I go up third. There's four comics. Four comics, I go up third. It's a woman, a white woman, [an] Asian guy, me, and the headliner is a black guy. I go, "Well, that's interesting. Okay." I mean, I liked being part of that. I go, "Well, that's interesting. That's a good thing." I don't—I get there after the first woman goes up, because I don't—I want to get there closer to my time. I don't need to be here all of the show; I'm going to go up third. I'm funny, I'm getting to myself, and I go, "Okay, okay." So my plan is to first do mainstream stuff, get them on my side, and then do lesbian stuff. "But it's going to be okay, but everybody's open-minded." So I get there, I look around, I look in the audience at people, "Oh, looks like a nice variety of people." They looked like they could be from San Francisco. They looked diverse. Just a quick scan. I go, "Okay." So then the woman who went on, she's coming off the stage. I go, "How was it?" She goes, "It was great. I talked about my girlfriend." I go, "Oh, you're a lesbian." She goes, "Yeah. I talked about my girlfriend, I said 'pussy.'" She's saying all these things to me. I go, "Oh, well, I'll just start with queer stuff, I'm not going to even . . ."

KMD: She warmed them up, right?

MP: Yeah. She warmed them up. So then the next guy is onstage, and I can kind of hear, he's doing some Asian stuff, and they're laughing at that. And I go, "Okay. Obviously he's not gay, he's just . . ." I go, "Okay." So I'm backstage and I'm getting ready, and I'm wearing a dress, and the emcee introduces me as, "Hey, our next performer—pretty in a dress." Something, again, doing that thing to me. And I was like . . . [sigh] So I get onstage, I don't let that get me down, I go onstage, and I do my lesbian stuff right away because there's—the woman before me said—she was my warm-up. So I say my thing about where I go get a massage. And what I first say is, I go, "Yeah, I was a little nervous this afternoon, because I knew I was going to be in front of a lot of women here, and so I became kind of moist," meaning moist skin, but they always take it to that sexual place. That's not what I mean. I just—I always do that, right? Just saying one thing and they think of something. I say "moist," the entire audience goes, "Ugh." They get up, they're stomping out. It was as if I said—

KMD: The equivalent of "cunt," in a more aggressive—

MP: Not even. It was the "moist." "Moist" was equated with "You guys are going to die. You guys are assholes." It was—

KMD: Oh, my goodness.

MP: Okay?

KMD: Weird.

MP: Yes. And from that moment on, things just were awful. Horrible, in fact. They were pissed, they were throwing—they were moving, they were saying things to me. And I thought, "The show must go on. I need my money. I got to do that. I would really like to just stop and go offstage and cry and go home, but I need my money." So despite the big globs of fear-sweat that was coming out of my pores—it was huge sweat, huge sweat stains under the arms. I did my thirty-minute set in I think twenty minutes. I was just zipping through it. I finally get to the end, "Thank you very much, good night," and kind of decent applause, for the chaos and the animosity that was coming my way. Maybe they're like, "Thank you, thank God, the lesbian's off the stage. Great." I get offstage, and I'm just catching my breath. I don't want to cry, I don't want to fall apart, because I know that I'm going to have to come back, and we're going to take a group bow. So then the headliner, the black guy goes on, and he's doing all this racist stuff, all this misogynist stuff, all this homophobic stuff. He's doing it, okay, at the multicultural comedy night. And the audience is on the floor. And he goes on way too long, and then finally he's done. And the whole time, I've just been in the back, thinking, "Why am I here? Why am I here? This is horrible."

And the lesbian who went on before me—when I tell this story to friends, they go, "You know what? They probably thought that lesbian was a man." [laughter] And you know what? Maybe they did, because when she came off that stage and reported that to me, she was happy. And there was no way, if she said pussy, my girlfriend—there was no way. I didn't even say pussy, I said moist. So he's done, and the emcee goes, "Okay, all the comics come back onstage," and so I just kind of got myself together. I was able to

towel-dry the sweat off me, and I go onstage, and we're taking a bow, taking a bow, and the deal was, after the show, we were going to have dinner together—

KMD: Oh, God.

MP: In the dressing room, backstage area. So I thought, "Okay, I'm just going to eat a little bit, get my check, and go to my hotel room." So we all come back, and everybody's going, "Hey, that was a good show." I'm thinking, "Are you kidding? Are you fucking—were we at the same show?" "Hey, that was a good show. That was fun, huh?" So I'm back there, we have the dinner, and then the audience starts filtering in the back. So I'm thinking like, "Oh, God." I go, "Where's my . . ." I want to stand by—

KMD: The door.

MP: Yeah, I wanted to stand behind somebody. So the people who knew me—I didn't meet them yet, but the people who knew me—there was about four of them—they come up to me, and they go, "Monica, we are so sorry. I don't know why they were—I don't know why they did that to you. There was just no reason how they were so hostile like that. We wanted to stand up and tell them to shut up and listen to you, but we were afraid that they were going to hurt us." [laughter] That's how hostile it was when I was doing my thing.

KMD: Right. And what year was this?

MP: That was '94. So then, as other people are coming back, they're getting the black guy to sign the posters—it was kind of an interesting poster—so he signed the posters. And so some of his followers are coming up to me, they're going, "Hey, could you sign your name to this too? You were good." "Did you—were you at the same show?" It was just a very weird—what I received immediately, being onstage, and what I was hearing offstage, and people coming to me, and I was signing autographs. It was just weird. So I go back to my hotel room, and I'm a mess, I'm sobbing. I quickly called Diane, "It was awful. I can't believe that I just survived this." The next morning, they take me to brunch at—I think Las Brisas. It's a café owned by Latina lesbians, pretty famous—

KMD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MP: Las Brisas, I think it's called?

KMD: I don't know the name, but yeah.

MP: I walk in there, and the owners and the staff, they go, "Monica, I heard about last night. We are so sorry." So everybody's hearing about this horrible night.

KMD: Everybody's heard about it, yeah.

MP: But what I find out was, the majority was the leftover football audience from earlier in the day. Austin played—Texas Longhorns or something. It was the rival—rival teams played football, and a lot of the audience members, a lot of testosterone came to the comedy show. And the majority was a football audience. So that—I go, "Okay, yeah. That seemed like it. That seemed like a football audience." Yeah, that was my last—that was the last time. But again, that was a comedy, stand-up format audience type situation.

KMD: Right, even if they're not drinking, they're expecting you to give them—

MP: Yeah, they were not drinking, but they were, "Yeah!" Because they loved that guy who did the homophobic and the racist and misogynist. They thought he was hilarious.

KMD: So I guess "multicultural" just meant different color. It wasn't changing the ideas. I mean, I thought you were invited for the—you know, LMU [Loyola Marymount University] had that.

MP: Me, too. No, and on my contract—on the contract, it said, "No mean-spirited,"—so when I signed—in my hesitancy, when I got the contract, I go, "Oh, okay. Well, that's embracing. I'll sign it." La, la, la. [singing] "All we are saying is give peace a chance." Yeah, see, my insecurities kept being met by, "Oh, no, no, but it's going to be okay." So it was like, okay, that's it. If it's a stand-up comedy thing, I'm not going to do it.

KMD: You're not doing it.

MP: I am not doing it. I don't care—I do not care. But, yeah, so that was some scary shit, man. I was—whew. Wow. Globes of sweat.

KMD: Let's take a pause.

[break in audio]

KMD: Okay, we took a little pause to catch our breath. Monica was speaking about some performances she'd done. One of the questions on the guidelines is actually quite funny now that you think about it. Memories of early critical responses—

MP: Well, there you go.

KMD: I was wondering if there's other important early venues or performances that you want to talk about that were kind of formative in your career.

MP: I guess what stands out for me are the ones that were just super challenging, the audience. They weren't fun. This is early stand-up comedy, and we'd do, "Gay comedy at UC Berkeley!" And there are a lot of jocks in the audience. Jocks. I don't know what it is. It was okay when the women went on and did their thing, but when the male comic went on, the dogs got really loud. It got really bad, they had to call the cops, and cops had to escort us to our cars.

KMD: Whoa.

MP: Yeah. You know, but what was interesting, now that I look back at it—it wasn't a good thing, but when you make history, when you're making history, you don't know you're making history. And we just didn't know how severe things were, because we just wanted to perform. "I want to try out my new Lassie bit." We don't think about, "I'm going to die tonight." But there was a few times where—I mean, we're such targets. We're such perfect targets. Here we are onstage, and somebody wanted to really hurt us, announcing, "Gay comedy at this time at this address!" You want to come and hurt us? Come! You don't—

KMD: Did it ever get to that?

MP: No, but that—the cops coming to escort us to our cars, that was pretty intense. That has stayed in my head, definitely stayed in my head. The other times that that really stayed in my head are the times that we performed as Culture Clash, performing in front of Latino audiences, and them not embracing our queer selves, me and Marga. And like I said, the times that we would say anything that had to do anything, an inkling of gay culture, the audience let us know. There were moans and groans and—you know, yet the guys are onstage grabbing their crotches and doing all this homophobic and misogynist stuff—that was okay. But any sign of queerness was not. And it was just a drag. It was just not to be embraced for our whole selves.

KMD: So I'm wondering if you're more careful in your—when you get contracted to do work, do you ask about audience, or do you . . .

MP: Yeah, well, for the most part, when people hire me now, they're hiring—queer lezbo, queen of the queer lezbos, Monica Palacios. I'm getting hired for their—Arizona State is hiring me for their border series. People—artists who work dealing with border philosophy and what have you, and they want me [*laughter*]*—they want me to be edgy, cutting-edge. That was always one of my favorite phrases, "cutting-edge." Does that make me a cook? I don't know. What is that? Yeah, you know, I'm getting hired by the LGBT department, and Chicano studies, where they're saying, "Please do that part where you talk about your wife." They want me to do certain things.*

KMD: Does it feel old after awhile then, or—if you get known for that particular skit, do you feel like you're having to—the audience is demanding of you to do the same old thing?

MP: No, because [of] things that I've learned as a performer. "The show must go on," and, "You're going to do things that you've done a thousand times." Well, more than a thousand times. It's like Tony Bennett. I believe he sings "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" every single time. But what do you do? You make it fresh, like you're doing it for the first time. And that's what I learned. It's part of the contract, you make it fresh. And I think that's a skill that you have to have, that you may get it—[as if] you're saying it for the first time, giving it a little bit of a new sparkle every time you do it.

KMD: Do you change the script, or do you just mean performatively, you bring something different to it?

- MP: Yeah. My little old queer soul self brings something different to it. And just the older that I've gotten, just more comfortable in my skin, more comfortable. And I think that's the difference now. You see me now as opposed to ten years ago, I'm more comfortable. And I'll use this phrase, "I don't give a shit." When you don't give a shit about stuff—you can love me, you can hate me. This is what I'm going to do. Interpret it as you will. I used to always get bent out of shape when somebody would come to me and they'd go, "Oh, that thing that you do about lesbians," and they would expound on what they thought it was—I would just [say], "No, I'm just being funny." It would bug me, and that was like—whatever. You have the right to do that.
- KMD: Do you read the analyses that people do? The scholarly or critical—
- MP: I do. I do. And at first, I was bothered by it. "What? I was just trying to be funny." I wasn't doing anything about Malinche, I swear. I don't even know who that is. Yeah. I didn't know the world of scholars or anything, so.
- KMD: I'm curious if you—because we've had this conversation before, about Malinche or Guadalupe or the typical—I mean, we started to develop, in the '60s and the '70s, a visual vocabulary, a literary vocabulary. There was the creation of Chicano arts, right? Do you ever feel like, "Okay, I'm not going to do that routine, guys. Don't expect it of me." Has it been expected of you to do some of the—maybe I lost you.
- MP: Some of the things that they're just expecting from me?
- KMD: Yeah, in this genre of—you know, I mean—the guys in Culture Clash are a good example. They do the *cholo* low-rider look.
- MP: Yes.
- KMD: Do you find that your—
- MP: I have a quick question. I'm not hearing the voices that I was hearing on our last tape. Does that mean anything? Because I was hearing myself, and I'm not hearing myself being recorded.
- KMD: Right now?
- MP: Yeah, 'cause when we were doing it earlier—
- KMD: You could hear yourself?
- MP: I could hear the—
- KMD: Oh, this? Yeah, you're being recorded.
- MP: Okay. Sorry.
- KMD: Probably interfering with the [mic], that's why I have it way over here.
- MP: I was just checking. Sorry.
- KMD: That's helping you remember that it's on, that's why I left it on. The transcriber will hate me, but it sounds good to me.
- MP: Yeah. I'm sorry, the guys doing the *cholo* stuff—
- KMD: Yeah, do you—
- MP: Do I feel pressured?
- KMD: Yeah, in fact, even within the queer community—what was it called?—the lipstick lesbian. That was in the '80s. It was in the '80s or the '90s?
- MP: Eighties.
- KMD: Lipstick lesbian? Because—
- MP: Oh, '90s.
- KMD: What's-her-name went to Yale, where I was.
- MP: The hair was the '80s—dyke-do, '80s.
- KMD: So was there any pressure to do those—
- MP: Certain type?
- KMD: Yeah, type.
- MP: Yeah, when I have done an all-lesbian comedy night, I believe that the audience is expecting me to do certain formulaic lesbian jokes. Yes.

KMD: Do you give them a little bit of that, or do you give them—

MP: I give them my version of it. But I don't—I'm going to do what's funny to me. I'm going to do what I'm really passionate about. Because if I do this, I believe—if I'm really into it, and give you 100 percent, I believe I'm going to make you laugh. I believe I'm going to get you to connect with me. So it's rare that you'll see me perform the lineup of lesbian comics. I'm not that. For one thing, I don't consider myself a lesbian comic. There's a slice of me, there's a slice of me in there, but the last time I did an all-lesbian show, I did it because I needed the money. I insisted that I go on first.

KMD: Really?

MP: I just wanted to get it over with. I didn't want to be pacing half the night—it was three of us, so I didn't want to be pacing at the very end. And I was hired to do—it was called NFL. It was the night before the—

KMD: Whatever game?

MP: Super Bowl. I'm so out of touch with football. *[laughter]*

KMD: Same here.

MP: But I used to be very much into football. It was the night before the Super Bowl, and she titled it "NFL: Night of Funny Lesbians." I [thought], "Well, that's clever." It was me and two other women, and I insisted that I go on first. And I was so nervous, because I hadn't done an all-lesbian comedy night, lesbian comic, comedy night, in years. And I was afraid that they were going to expect the formulaic—you know, talk about the girlfriend, and coming home to meet the parents, the same old stuff.

KMD: Well, also, if it's a—a non-Chicano/Latino audience, do they expect certain Latina-type, too?

MP: I guess, yeah. Yeah. I was just expecting that they were going—I was assuming they were expecting certain things. And I know this producer usually—it's a white audience—it's a known fact, that's what it is. So I'm thinking, "Oh, God. Okay, make the best of it." And so I thought that—I think my girlfriend at the time had said, "You know what? Maybe you should have this—like a football theme going on." Or if it was me—I forget who came up with the football thing. Play up the football thing. So I went to the second-hand store, got a jersey. I wore sweats—not sweats, but running pants. And I played up the football thing. I came out and I threw rubber footballs, and I had little moments where I made the audience—I asked them questions, and I gave them prizes if they got the right answer, and they were athletic whistles. [The] 99¢ stores come in handy. A great idea. Great idea.

KMD: That must have went over well, yeah.

MP: It was funny. It was funny and it was fun. That just made me so relaxed, and I just was larger than life, because I was so afraid I was going to bomb. This is just weird, but you would think—how could you be afraid you're going to bomb, Monica? You've been doing this for twenty-some years. I was scared shitless, as they say. "I'm going to play up the football thing." And I did. I came out, and I was big, and I was hilarious. I was a great opening act. I think it was really hard to follow me. I just made them crazy. I made them just nuts. Just nuts.

KMD: So I'm wondering, why this pressure? Does it come from your expectation of the audience, that they might have this expectation of you, this loop?

MP: Yes.

KMD: Or does it come from like the guy that books you, the producer, or whatever,

MP: It's probably a combination. It's probably a combination, but definitely, if you're used to doing one-person shows in your own space on your own time, your own crowd, and then you have to get yourself into this stand-up comedy scene—again, which I've shared—the stand-up comedy scene was not my thing. I work myself—I self-sabotage.

KMD: Sounds pretty dangerous.

MP: I do it to my writer self as well. "You're not writing enough. You're not good enough." It's that self-sabotage. But I've had those awful experiences. So, yeah, and thinking, "Okay, this audience is going to expect me to do this. I'm not going to do that, I'm going to do my thing." See, but the more I'm comfortable in my own skin, I'm going to deliver.

KMD: We were talking earlier about—well, before I go on, though, I was going to ask, is there any other early important performances you want to mention, or influential folks who helped advocate for your work to get your there before I change topics?

MP: Early career? Well, just working with Marga Gomez really influenced me greatly. She's just a great performer. I learned a lot, as far as the production end of it. I didn't know—I had never produced a show before. And then when we did our first show together, she really did—she took the reins and really did—write the press release. I didn't know about the press release. Just things like that that you don't think about as a performer. So I learned a lot, definitely a big influence in my life. What's that scholar? I forget her name—[Tey] Diana Rebolledo, one of my first academic support people. Big time, big time. She mentioned my name, and I got work 'cause of her, definitely. Absolutely. Deena González, absolutely promoted me always. Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Alicia Arrizón. Lots of scholars, Chicana scholars, who have—

KMD: Brought you to the institution that they were working at?

MP: Yes. [And] they've done research and papers on my work, and then they brought me to—and then they've talked about me, and they've gotten me connected to other people who have hired me. And my family in general has been so damn supportive of me. In the early years, they didn't really understand why I was onstage talking about my sexuality. "Why do you do that?"

One time, my sister Eleanor, who is super funny—I did a show—no, I did a show in San Francisco and the *San Jose Mercury News*—where I lived, San Jose—they did a spread about me, and I think my mom, like, hid the paper from my dad, so that he wouldn't read it. I was like, "Mom, why?" So it didn't mean matter. She just did it, and we were cracking up. And so, she [says], "Don't worry about the other relatives because they can't even read." [laughter] So just silly things like that. But for the most part, they have been super supportive, coming to my shows. Yeah, just being there for me, and, you know, supporting me financially, because I'm doing my work, I'm not doing the nine to five job. Countless times—I owe them so much damn money, it's not even funny. But they believe in me—that strong foundation, just growing up in this loving household. And then when I started my career, and just being there for me and supporting me, and all aspects of that, has been really great, a great thing. And also, being published—my work, [it's] in a few books now—[that] has also really helped my name get out there. I'm always surprised when I run into students, they go, "Oh, yeah, yeah, that's right. We read your work last year." I go, "Oh, really?"

KMD: Which one?

MP: "Oh, finally get to meet you. That's great." I was in San Antonio last week, and the woman came to me, she said, "Oh, my God. Your work in *Out of the Fringe*—I have never laughed out loud like that reading a book." She goes, "It's hysterical. That was funny, that book's so great, so it's great to meet you." So that's always a big kick, when strangers come up to me and say that my work—they love my work, or my work has changed their lives. That's heavy. "It's changed your life? I'm only trying to be funny." That's my response. Just being funny. So it's very humbling, and it's a big honor when people, strangers, tell you huge things like that. Makes it all worth it.

KMD: I wanted to ask you about the process, because we were talking before, how you act out—that's the language I would use, just 'cause I was trained as an actor. You act out your dialogue, and even your monologues. You work it through orally. I also noticed, in your space, here in your apartment, you've got a lot of—I want to call them posty-notes, but they're not. They're like even better than posty-notes because they're on the computer. They're typed out.

MP: Yeah. I write love notes to myself.

KMD: Could you talk a little bit more about your process? It's textual—

MP: You are seeing little love notes to myself on the wall, because—as I expressed earlier—that little self-sabotage voice that says, "You're not good enough. You can't do it." It gets loud at times, and I need—I'm a visual personal, filmic—I need to see my power, what I can do, in print. So these are little notes that I have all over to myself. I need to look at that and read it, and then I'll say it out loud. And these little notes really helped, these specific shows that I'm talking about here, about the NACCS [National Association of

Chicana and Chicano Studies] conference. And I did a show at Colby College in Maine. Yeah, my little—these little chanting things help me, because who else is going to? I live by myself.

KMD: Have you always done that?

MP: My dog, when she was alive, would tell me little things. But you know what, for the most part, yeah. Yes, little notes.

KMD: What about the ones that are part of this—it looks like they're part of *Sweet Peace*, that you're blocking a scene, or whatever—

MP: Oh, it's just ideas outlining possible scenes. And I finally—the whiteboard, it just finally made sense. I go, [*gasp*] "I know! A whiteboard!" And so I went to go and I picked up the whiteboard, yeah.

KMD: Did you work like that before, or that's a new thing?

MP: No, that's a new thing. And my little index cards are my bits for my shows, and I order little—my stories that I do—and I structure them.

KMD: Oh, so you're working out the sequence of the performance.

MP: Yeah, because usually I would go stay at the computer, but since I've been doing it this way where I actually see it, I'll come out with, "parents, born in San Jose, the mascot, St. Patrick's . . ." You know, I see it, I visually see it. "Oh, okay." It's a better thing for me than just keeping it in my head, because there's just too much in my head. And that worked for me in the olden days.

KMD: Oh, but you have more material now.

MP: But now, less brain cells and more material.

KMD: It's not less brain cells, it's—

MP: No, I think it's less brain cells. [*laughter*] Yeah.

KMD: I think the storage room is full.

MP: Yeah. Well, the answering machine that will not take any more messages. That's me. Yeah, so these little signs, yeah. It works for me, definitely.

KMD: So you're doing it to organize a show. You're doing it to—

MP: Affirmations.

KMD: Affirmations, and to construct the development of the plot.

MP: Yes. Yes, yes. I'm all about the word. I need to—I love words. And I want to see them. In my paintings that I do, I like putting—I like adding words in there. I've always had this thing for it.

KMD: I didn't know you still painted.

MP: I've been doing it lately, yes. Watercolors. And actually, this little—this is one of my scenes from my film that I'm working with. Paz, as a young girl, she paints, and I wanted to play with this. Things could change, of course—as of now, the film will start with an image like this, and then the image—

KMD: Do you want to describe it?

MP: The image is a desert scene at night, and it's—a pretty blue sky, but dark. There's twinkling stars, and the moon is shaped like a *milagro* heart with a dagger through it. And we find out—as we unfold the story—we find out why. There's a mountain range, the desert, the sand, and then there's cacti and shrub all over the place. So we see this, a close shot of this, and then it morphs into an actual real desert scene at night, and then it unfolds from there. So, yeah.

KMD: I mean, we've been talking about your comic stuff, and you're not only reminding me what I have seen you perform, but I mean, this is very romantic, this image.

MP: You think so?

KMD: Yeah.

MP: Okay. Well, yeah.

KMD: Do you think people take more seriously the dramatic writer than the comic? That's part of your—

MP: Yeah. Well, the answer—yes, people don't take comedy seriously. I've experienced that several times.

KMD: For example?

MP: For example, in the early days, when I was—you know, I would do any show just to get exposure, so I've shared a night with a poet, or somebody reading from their book. And they would go, "Oh, we'll put you on last." They never regarded . . . "Oh, you're just a comic." They would always do that. It was that, that type of behavior toward me. But—I mean, now it's a lot different. It's a lot different. People regard my work as—there's serious messages in it. But yeah, I mean, that's how it was. People were [saying], "Oh, it's comedy? Oh, okay." I think Rodney Dangerfield was correct in saying they get no respect—people look at it that way. It wasn't serious. Comedy, that's not serious.

KMD: But you've had a sense of your own crafting of story, development of plot, character, on the formal side, right?

MP: Mm-hmm.

KMD: And have you had a sense of the underlying seriousness of your work, or were you really just—

MP: Uh, yeah. Well—yes, now I see what people see. And when I'm writing something—I mean, *Sweet Peace*, the screenplay, I'm trying to get across some really serious things. The main woman boss, she's an activist, and present-day, she's involved in the immigration debates that are happening. And the story—as of now, the story is, we see her activism self, and then we also see her—it's these two scenes that go back and forth. And it's her activism self at the rally, and then it cuts to her—and all that charged emotion that happens. And then it cuts to her and her lover at a motel, and they're making love. And then it goes back to the rally, and it's getting heated. The cops are getting physical with the people, and [then] it goes back to the lovemaking. And for me, that was—I chose to do it that way because I'm showing—her two worlds, how she lives, this Latina lesbian, this Chicana lesbian. One minute you're fighting for people's rights and your own rights, and the next minute, you know, you're in control, you're in control. And it goes back and forth with that.

That's how her life—that's how lesbian—how you have to be on your guard all the time. You think you're minding your own business, you're not disturbing anybody, but then [a] car drives by. They go, "Lesbian!" or "Dyke!" It's like, "Why did you . . .? I'm not hurting you, I'm not bothering you." So I wanted to play with that. Will people—will everybody see that? I don't know. Probably not. Some people will, when I brought it, when I showed—when we were talking about it in the workshop, there was—they liked that aspect, that I was showing her worlds, where she comes from. So they got it. I go, "Oh, okay. That's good." So yeah, you know, I'm trying to like—I want to reach—

KMD: I don't know, I just always felt that your work was quite—the word we would use in the visual arts was *political*. It's political. Like—you were making us laugh, but there was a political undertone, and it wasn't necessarily about the big political questions. It was about the intimate ones.

MP: For the longest time, I was just doing comedy to do comedy, and I didn't know I was in the middle of a big AIDS epidemic, and fighting for queer rights. I was trying to—seriously, I was just trying to be funny. And it wasn't until people were coming up to me and saying, "Just the fact of you being onstage is—I can't even tell you what it does for me." And I would, you know, "Really?" And I'm the—during this time, I'm the youngest one out of a handful of people who's performing. So I'm acting my age. I'm twenty-three, and they're twenty-eight, they're closer to thirty. These other people, they've lived—they've had more challenges in their lives, and dealt more with the queer world. And I was just getting into it. "Oh, you have to perform. You have to do this for us. You speak for us." "I do? But I'm not . . ." It just started to make sense to me. I go, "Oh, okay. Well, then I shouldn't say that. Okay. All right, I'm going to do it this way now."

KMD: So you had a different sense of yourself, kind of fitting in with, sounds like, queer politics or the social movement that was going on. What about the Chicano part? Did you—you had mentioned one time that, you know, you were going to do characters that were not like the ones you saw, or the ones that you were asked to play in Hollywood.

MP: I got more involved in my Chicano sensibilities when this gentleman . . . God, what's his name? He died of AIDS. But big activist in the community. Rodrigo Reyes? I think that might have been his name. I think, Rodrigo Reyes. I was performing at the local comedy queer joint, Valencia Rose Café, and he came, "Oh,

man. Monica, you're great. I'm going to do this benefit." Some agency, either immigration or a queer [organization], some Latino [organization]. And he goes, "And I would love for you to perform. Do you have more Latino stuff?" He said that to me, because I was doing mainstream—not mainstream, but just general, generic queer stuff. I go, "Oh, more Latino stuff. Yeah, give me a minute." This show was going to be at this little dive drag bar called Esta Noche—very famous. It's on Sixteenth Street and I would hope that it's still there. Right around the corner from La Cumbre Taqueria.

Anyway, it was going to be there, and it was going to be me and Teresita, this woman who I think was—a man who was becoming a woman, and some other people. I'm pretty sure his name was Rodrigo Reyes, I'm pretty sure. And so because of him, I went back into my mad scientist mode, and I came up with more Latino stuff. I think because of him, I did the Beverly Hillbillies in Spanish, which is one of my claims to fame. Just some other silly stuff.

KMD: I guess I just read things differently. When does the one about the taco, and you're eating the taco, and she's—you're watching the dripping taco—

MP: Oh, that, that—that comes about when I moved to LA, and I get in touch with VIVA, Lesbian and Gay Latino Artists, and being around queer Latino artists really opened my eyes. And actually, just coming to Los Angeles really opened my eyes.

[*break in audio*]

KMD: We're on tape 2 with Monica Palacios on August 9 in Los Angeles. This is Karen Mary Davalos. Go ahead, Monica. You were talking about coming to Los Angeles.

MP: Coming to Los Angeles is when I really come in touch with my Latina/Chicana self. Growing up, as I told you before, I know that being Mexican can be a problem, there's a possibility of a problem. But I never felt blatant racism. I never really felt that. And then being in San Francisco, I just felt very embraced. It was so diverse, there was such a mix of people there, and it was so small. So coming to Los Angeles, I physically see the Latinos washing cars and the white people driving them. I had never seen that. I had never . . . I go, "Oh, okay." And the woman that I was staying with, who allowed me to stay at her house as I was getting my act together—a dear friend of mine—she lives in Glendale, and Glendale, in the late '80s was very white. I mean, it's still white now, but it was just super white. And she lived more towards the foothills where it gets expensive.

So I would walk—I'm a mess. I'm coming from New York, because I think I was going to live in New York. I don't . . . But I landed in LA, and I'm just a mess. Emotionally, I'm a mess. So I would walk around this neighborhood a lot, and I'd always just get the weirdest looks. "What are you doing here?" Nobody said that to me, but that's what I felt these stares were saying to me. And I thought—do they think I'm looking for work? Because their gardeners and their nannies were all Latino, and I had never seen that before.

KMD: Did people have maids when you were growing up?

MP: No. I knew maids existed. I knew what they were for. But I never saw—I'm sure I saw the black maid on television, more so than the Latina maid on television at this point, 'cause this was the '60s. But yeah, I never—to visually see that. Laborers—the haves and the have-nots. And then, you know, the car wash—the car wash culture. To see Mercedes—I had never seen luxury cars. I had never seen so many at one time. So to visually see—and I would go to car washes because I would get these little coupons for two dollars off, so it wouldn't cost me much. That's why I would go to wash my little funky two-bit Toyota.

So you would see the Rolls-Royce and these BMWs and the Mercedes and the white people who owned them. And then I would see them actually give the guys who clean their car a dollar, and then say, "Oh, no, you missed a spot." Do this and do that. And I—I go, "Oh, that's what this city's about." So from that point on, it was always just . . . And when I would water my friend's garden in the front, and people would drive by, I would think—I had never [have] thought this before—"I wonder if they think that I'm a

gardener?” I had never thought about that before, but because of the environment, I started thinking that way. So yeah, coming to LA really just—really got me into identity. And I’m Latina, and I’m Chicana.

KMD: But I guess what I was trying to say before, your work had a context that was specifically Chicana-Mexicana, because I saw your work in San Francisco.

MP: In the ’80s?

KMD: Yeah, it had to be the ’80s.

MP: Do you remember a venue, perhaps? Was I with Marga? By myself?

KMD: You were with other people that—I remember one venue, I saw you twice—so one was Josie’s Juice Joint—

MP: Okay. Josie’s, yeah.

KMD: And there was—you were not the only person performing.

MP: If it’s Josie’s, then it’s the ’90s now, and that means I’ve gotten my one-person show together. So you’re seeing me when I’d already been in LA. If it’s Josie’s, then I’ve already been in LA, and now I’ve come back to San Francisco to do a show. So that’s why you’re seeing more Latina stuff. That’s my LA influence. When I got to LA and got situated, that’s when I got really very much into my Latina/Chicana self. Prior to that I was doing stuff, but not fully immersed. That’s when I—being in it, being in Los Angeles, meeting other queer Latino artists—that really opened my eyes.

KMD: So VIVA was already going and you joined it?

MP: Yes. VIVA was happening, and I met Rolando Palencia, [I’ll] never forget. I was at this other Latino, queer Latino event, mostly sociopolitical group, and I did—it was an awards thing, or—some special night for them, and they had food. And my girlfriend at the time asked me, “Please do some comedy while people are eating their dinner.” That’s—I did a lot of stuff like that. “You are a filler. Just do . . .” And I remember people got upset, because I assumed—my jokes were assuming that people were all Mexican or all Chicano. It was already—they were already giving me that political shit.

So I didn’t feel very embraced that night, and Roland, the dear person that he is, he gets up and he goes, “Hi. I’m Roland Palencia, and I work with this group called Que Viva, and I’d like you to be a part of it somehow, some way. I love what you did tonight.” He’s an artist, a fellow artist. That’s why we make this connection. None of this fuckin’ stupid political, socialization shit! [*laughter*] He’s an artist. That’s why he gets me. And I have maintained this connection with him. And then, you know—I think I was broke, and I was calling various people. “Hey, do you have any jobs? Do you have any jobs coming up? I really need cash.” And I called Roland, and he said, “You know what? We’re going to hire an assistant for our HIV outreach. Would you want to do something like that?” “Yeah, I’m there.” So I think it was the next day or the next week, I became their assistant to their HIV outreach project, which was Teatro VIVA.

KMD: Right.

MP: And they had gotten this huge chunk of money—this art agency, VIVA, had gotten this huge chunk of money through—what’s that, office of mayors? Something about mayors.

KMD: Mayors.

MP: It’s this agency that they give money [The United States Conference of Mayors]. But anyway, VIVA got a hundred thousand dollars. It was this big huge thing over—I think over three years or something like that. And they got the money to do community outreach through theater. And I’m sure the grant was written really—very general, and they probably didn’t even think they were going to get it type of deal, and they got it. So the gentleman who was in charge of the Teatro was [Beto Araiza], a performance artist, HIV positive performance artist. And he got this troupe together, and they created sketches where there was information about getting tested, why it’s important, love yourself. And they would go to the bars, because they were finding out that the Latino population was not going to the clinics, because they didn’t see themselves . . . So bringing the information to the people. And that’s what Teatro VIVA was about.

And so I—Beto was on leave because he was doing his show, he was traveling with his show, and they needed people to help run that. And it was me, Luis Alfaro was the director, and also was Guillermo

Hernandez. And it was the three of us, these three artists, in this little office space. And what had happened was, VIVA—the art group VIVA, kind of slipped away from their art mission statement, and they were doing more HIV outreach stuff. And the three artists were saying—you know, we’re going, “That’s—you guys, it’s great that we have this grant, and we’re lucky to have it, and it’s sustained VIVA, but we need to do more art. Isn’t that what our mission statement is?” So because of us, we were all three in there, we—this is ’92—we just made VIVA really visible. We go, “Well, let’s have an art exhibit.” “Okay, what do you want to have? What kind of work do you want to have?” “Oh, let’s have Dyan Garza. What about Joey Terrill?” We just did it. “You want to do this? Want to have a show? Let’s do the show. How much money do we have? Do we have at least a hundred dollars? Yeah? Okay.”

And we made the fliers—we were artists doing what we should be doing. Because what Luis Alfaro did for us was he goes, “You guys, what’s the mission statement? Find the mission statement.” And the mission statement was to discover, empower, and promote gay and lesbian Latino artists; that’s what we have to do. If there’s ever a question—if you’re questioning whatever comes your way, go back to the mission statement. Oh, hey. So his non-profit savvy, really put VIVA on the map. And he was doing a lot, he was performing a lot and what have you, and he just has a really big mouth. He’s connected to so many people.

KMD: You make this sound as if this starts as a desire to—we need to eat, we need to pay the rent.

MP: Yes, yes, yes. But I also was reaching out to them specifically because I really liked Roland. I liked that he—he put together VIVA because he had this fear that all these artists were going to die, because they were. And he goes, “Well, they need to leave a legacy, but they need to leave it at some group. We have to form a queer family of artists.” And that’s what he did, that was his vision. I think he was swimming one day, and that’s how it came to him, he’s like, “I have to do this.” So I forget, it was him, it was Alfaro, some other people.

KMD: How did that speak to your experience?

MP: I had—see, I had never—you know, the fact that I go, “Gay and lesbian Latino artists? This is a first. That’s me. I don’t really know how I fit in, because I do solo work, but I want to be part of—can I play?” We were changing as we just went along. It was in the moment. Luis Alfaro, me, and Guillermo—I had never—whereas the Culture Clash thing, I was with heterosexual men. We weren’t speaking the same language, whereas these guys were.

KMD: So that—what other roles did you play in that, in VIVA?

MP: In VIVA—so I was hired first as the assistant, and then Luis Alfaro got involved with the Mark Taper [Forum], and he left his post. So I didn’t really want to become the director of Teatro VIVA, because that just meant more work for me, and I just didn’t want it. I wanted to be more into my own thing. But out of necessity, I took it. So I became the director of Teatro VIVA, went to those boring-ass meetings, ’cause VIVA became part of the Gay Men of Color Consortium. And through this, they were getting—now they were getting money from the county of LA. This originally grant for Teatro VIVA—I’m pretty sure it was a federal thing.

And that from the inception of Teatro VIVA, we had to connect with other HIV agencies that were happening at the present moment. There was this Asian/Pacific Islander something-something, and the African American—I forget what they were doing. So it was—yeah, three agencies that became the Gay Men of Color Consortium, and under that umbrella, they applied for money from the county, and they got it. So as I was doing that work, I was—we were still doing—we were still making VIVA, the artists’ group, more visible, through performances and art exhibits and just various things throughout LA.

KMD: What was the venue for the visual arts?

MP: The venue?

KMD: Yeah, what venues? Where were you doing exhibitions?

MP: We just used that little office that we had there in Silver Lake. And then we got—we were part of—remember that Mexico—that huge international Mexico thing that came here, I think it was in—had to have been in 2002?

KMD: Splendors, are you thinking, the exhibition [*inaudible*]?

MP: Yeah, there, that. There was a little—

KMD: There were offshoots—

MP: Various offshoots of it.

KMD: Arte de México or something like that.

MP: Yes, yes. And so VIVA did their version of that. And I forget where that was. I think it might have been in Beyond Baroque. So it was that. So, you know—and Luis, because of his various connections, he made VIVA. “Yeah,” he would just, “we’re going to do this thing with this group.” He was just working it. But that’s what he does in his own personal life. He’s constantly just working it, working it. So a lot of visibility ‘cause of him, and then visibility ‘cause of me and my own shows. When I did a show, I would do—out of a run, I would give one of the nights, a benefit performance for VIVA. So it was constantly—

KMD: Yeah, that’s how—I guess your—I’m not remembering which of the shows, but one of the shows is very much affiliated with VIVA.

MP: My first—actually, the first time that I premiered *Latin Lezbo Comic* is for VIVA. Both of those shows were for VIVA. I just—it just made sense to me. I didn’t know if I was going to be able to do it by myself, but under their support, and they helped me financially, get fliers out, stuff like that. So it worked out.

KMD: And what venue was that at?

MP: That—I premiered it at Highways, which was a good thing, because Highways was very white still at the time, and we had all these Latinos for the first time packed Highways. That really hadn’t happened to that degree before. I had to add—I had a show Friday night, a show Saturday, then I had to add a late-night Saturday show because the word got out. So yeah, it was constantly—we’re interchangeable.

KMD: So you’re doing your own work, but you’re also doing this work with VIVA?

MP: Yes.

KMD: And Luis was doing the same, and—

MP: And then Luis doing the same, and then Luis went to become the co-director of the Latino Theatre Initiative and the Taper with Diane Rodriguez. And then so I took the directorship of Teatro VIVA, and could just try to sustain VIVA as best we could. And so VIVA had a residency at this little funky office space in Silver Lake, and then Guillermo Hernandez knew the director at Beyond Baroque, which is just down the street in Venice, and so VIVA moved from Silver Lake to Venice. They worked up a deal where the rent was—I don’t, ridiculous. It was fifty dollars, maybe even a hundred dollars, and we had the smallest space. So we tried to utilize the space there as much as we could with exhibits and performances.

KMD: Who was organizing exhibitions?

MP: It was the board of directors of VIVA. But a lot of it was me. I was the power-horse.

KMD: Was Diane your—

MP: Diane was my partner at the time. But she’s working—all of the board of directors, they’re working, they have full-time jobs.

KMD: Yeah, that’s what I’m trying—to get a sense of how you could survey the art world, I guess, and who you would exhibit and how you would make those decisions?

MP: Yeah, we just—through [the] board of directors, we’d have meetings—somebody would say, “I want to do this.” “Well, yeah, but there’s not enough lesbians.” “Okay, well, bring in more lesbians and we’ll do it.” We were always trying to balance things. But what we found out was, VIVA had this reputation of being male, more male. And that always would bother us. So finally, what happened was, Diane and I, because the city of West Hollywood had Lesbian Visibility Week, and Roland—

KMD: City of Hollywood does a Lesbian Visibility—

MP: West Hollywood.

KMD: Right, West Hollywood.

MP: Lesbian Visibility Week. Because it’s a boy town, so they’re trying to reach out. So Roland—Roland was always doing things like this, calling us—he goes, “Hey, I just entered VIVA in this event. They’re going

to be calling you.” “Thanks, Roland.” It was kind of a pain in the ass, but it was good—but a pain in the ass. “But you’re not on the board of directors anymore, Roland.” “I know, but it would just be great, good exposure. They’re going to call you.” So he said that he told the directors of Lesbian Visibility Week that we should be a part of it. So we said, “Okay.” So the woman in charge, Karen—what’s her name, Karen. I forget her name. Great woman, great ally to VIVA. She goes, “Okay, well, think of some name that you want to call it.”

And so we knew that we were going to do a night of performance, poetry—it was going to be a variety—a Carol Barnett cabaret show, a variety show. And so I think—I believe it was me, I believe it was me that I came up with, “Let’s call this *Chicks & Salsa*.” Boom, *Chicks & Salsa* was born. We had an art exhibition. That was Diane’s thing, she gathered all these various artists. And we did a fair amount—not some hardcore promotion, but just—is this Internet, are we doing Internet yet?

KMD: We’re probably not doing internet then.

MP: This is ’92.

KMD: Could be, but not—

MP: If it isn’t ’92, then it’s ’94.

KMD: No, we’re not doing it. The you and me types aren’t. Other people are.

MP: Yeah. [*laughter*] So it’s just—it’s word of mouth. It’s me being my promoter self, because I’m a promotion whore. I know how to do it now. I have the newspaper contacts. So, you know—but it’s mostly word of mouth. That night, we were at the West Hollywood [Park] Auditorium, [on] San Vicente. It’s a huge auditorium—packed with women we had never seen before. Finally, a Latina lesbian art event. It wasn’t a Latina lesbian political event, it wasn’t a social—it was an art event, we’re promoting art and artists. And it’s powerful. It was amazing. We were really surprised that people from—women from all over were coming, saying, you know, we’ve never seen this before.

And a lot of women were not out, right, so they’d come to this specific thing, and they know that they’re not going to be outed. So that was life-changing. It was like, “Wow.” This is needed. Women don’t have a place—Latina women, queer Latina women don’t have a place to go, to gather. So we did that in various places up until ’98, because we couldn’t—we were kind of petering out. VIVA on the whole was kind of—we were burning out. We just—’cause ’92, ’93, ’94, we did so many things; we did too many things. But we really put VIVA on the map.

KMD: What were some of the things that really put them on the map in addition to *Chicks & Salsa*?

MP: *Chicks & Salsa*, *Raza & Rhinestones*.

KMD: Oh, yeah.

MP: All the cute coined names came from me, thank you very much. Doing things with the city, just various things with the city.

KMD: And it stays this multi—what do you want to call it?—multimedia arts. It’s not just performance, it’s not just anything with a word, but it’s also visual.

MP: Yeah. And the board members are artists, painters, and performers, and writers, and—

KMD: And the decision making is coming from group, or is it coming from—

MP: It’s coming from group, but I’m really—I’m the—what’s—

KMD: You’re the quarterback.

MP: I’m not the president, but I’m acting like one. Because I’m in the office. Because I’m running Teatro VIVA, and I’m doing that business. But I’m running—I’m in there, it’s me by myself, and Guillermo’s still there. Luis Alfaro’s gone by now, so I’m doing it, I’m in there. People are calling, “Who’s . . .?” They’re talking to me.

KMD: And this is a major part of your ’90s.

MP: Yes.

KMD: Getting a sense that you—working with other folks feels good, starts—I guess that what I want to get a little bit at is, what are some of the tensions in the group, and how do you resolve them? Because the

earlier group project that you do with Culture Clash, what becomes Culture Clash, the way you resolve it is to let go.

MP: To let go, because that's pretty toxic stuff.

KMD: Yeah. What are some of the issues that [come] up?

MP: Conflicts that come up, or—well, there's always money issues. There's always not enough women. "We need more women artists. We need more women painters." It's always too many men. Well, we just have to—women have to feel more comfortable. So we just verbally—we would present the problem on the table. Yeah, it got heated. "I didn't like how you did [that] thing." "Well, too bad." I remember one time, I forget—one big huge thing where we just had a blowout, it was a big blowout. People were just pissed off. But it was non-profit, it was a non-profit role. That's how—

KMD: Yeah, I'm less interested in the personality stories than the things that create conflict, you're saying funding, you're always worried about funding. Was it coming from the local, the state, you know?

MP: We were—at the time, we were being sustained by the HIV outreach money. We existed because of that. And it—but it also bothered us that we were this artist group, and we were—we shouldn't even be—how do we—it was just learning how to—how do we apply for that grant? And then the other thing was that we would talk about, "Well, we shouldn't even be dependent on grants. We should just make these—create these really great events where people want to pay money." Because grant writing was a pain in the ass. It was hard work, and who has the time for that?

KMD: Did you do that as well?

MP: Yeah. I did everything. I was the jack of all trades.

KMD: So I have this question here, the different roles that people played over time, the different positions—so you did all of them.

MP: Yeah. I was definitely the quarterback, and I had to make some decisions by myself, because I wasn't about to—it took too long to get people together. And I would just, "You guys, I'm sorry. You can be mad at me, I don't care." I just—I talked to these guys and I told him that we're going to do it. "If you don't want to do it, fine. I'll do it by myself" It was . . . Stuff like that happened. But then there was some. . . We had to vote on things, and we would get all pissed off, 'cause, "What? You don't want to do that?" "That's not fair." "Well, you guys . . ." Yeah. I think one of the problems was it was male-heavy. It was male-heavy at times. And that was an issue. How do we solve it? We just try to reach out to more female artists as best we could.

KMD: Who do you think got a good start with VIVA?

MP: I think Claudia Rodriguez who is doing her own thing now. I think VIVA really helped her get out there. Who else? And that's me. You know, a lot of the events, I'm the one, I'm the mastermind behind "Let's do this event." "Okay." And then I would just go ahead and take it, and I would title it and I would do the promotion and I would make sure we had enough money for it. VIVA would get the money to do it, but I was—would put things together under the VIVA title. Working at UCLA, teaching, and then I would see these kids that needed a venue, and I would . . . *Student Slam*, just give it some name and do it. So a lot of the things that happened was because of me, definitely. That's for sure. And I would just get the "okay." "Okay, I'm going to do it? Yeah, okay. Can you come and put stamps on the postcards so we can mail them out?" Big mail-outs was always a pain in the ass. But produced—yeah, produced many, many things.

KMD: And the—so the group of artists that are affiliated are fluid?

MP: "Fluid" meaning—

KMD: People come and go, you're not always using—you're bringing in different people. But there is a core—

MP: There's a core. There's a core of us. There's probably about—maybe eight.

KMD: And who are those folks?

MP: Myself, Dyan Garza, Vangie Griego, Luiz Sampaio, Jef Huereque, Luis Alfaro was on the board for awhile, Guillermo Hernandez, Miguel Angel Reyes.

KMD: Oh, really?

MP: Yes, very much. And then for a little bit was Teddy Sandoval, who died, died of AIDS. And then we would have guests. Guest people would kind of sit in on our meetings to present some proposal or to present some event that maybe—

KMD: That you would sponsor.

MP: Yeah. And a lot of—it was just—it was cool to be in the room of these working artists. It wasn't—we weren't doing it as a hobby. It was like, "No, no, no." Just—Diane was very adamant about—she goes, "You guys, we're not going to call this, this is not an office space. This is our studio. We're artists." Okay, cool. You know, just—because that wasn't happening before. "We're artists; let's act like artists. We're going to use language like artists." "Oh, okay."

KMD: Was that your first full-time gig working as an artist then? I mean, paid regularly. You obviously were doing this, but this sounds like—it was more than nine to five. I know it's got to have been more than nine to five.

MP: Oh, of course.

KMD: But your paycheck was coming from promoting and doing—

MP: Well, no. See, my paycheck is coming from—I'm the director of Teatro VIVA. That's where my paycheck is coming from. And I should have been in the office—this is off the record—I should have been in the office promoting Teatro VIVA and figuring out the next effort—which I did. I had things under control. But there was a lot of time, "Okay, I'm going to—since I'm in the office, I'm going to be doing this other stuff for the art group VIVA." So on one hand, we didn't like that we were using this AIDS money, because it was an artists' group. But it was sustaining us. It was allowing me to be in the office. And then little by little, the money was dwindling, so my paycheck was dwindling. So I was trying to not put in so many hours, but once you get involved in a non-profit, they suck you. So, I became VIVA, basically, because everybody else had jobs. Everybody had jobs that they had to—

KMD: You were saying, you were the nine to five. You were it.

MP: I was. I was that girl. It was really—I got burned-out, big time. And it was really hard to let it go, because I felt really bad. "Oh, God—but I'm done. I feel bad, but I'm done." And so by the time 2000 came around, "Guys, I've got to get out of here. I'm done."

KMD: And the grant had already been over by now.

MP: Oh, the grant had been over, years later, yeah. Various people were paying for—because by this time, we went from Beyond Baroque to the Center, the Gay & Lesbian Center, the Village. They had—I forget who it was, but they had cornered us and said, "Please, please, please, come and have your office here. The rent will be a hundred and fifty dollars a month, super cheap. We're trying to have this wing of the Center where we have various community groups, the people of color groups." These are white administrative people, administrative types. "One hundred fifty dollars a month? Yeah, shit, we'll take it." And by that time, we were really burned. A lot of the board members had fallen off. "I can't do it anymore. I don't want to do it anymore." But we had this tenth anniversary event in '98, I believe, at that El Rey Theatre in the Wilshire district—that was cool. That was a cool thing. And we made some decent money. But that was hard. A lot of people were pissed off putting that together. "I'm never doing this again!" A lot of clashing to get that event going.

And so soon after that, we're just dwindling, and it was just me, it was just pretty much me by myself, and Diane at the time was working on other things, and she would kind of help me every now and then. But it was—'98 was our last *Chicks & Salsa*, and we had it at The Village. And that was—it wasn't the best show. I thought, "Okay, we're done with this, we're not going to . . ." And so yeah, 2000. We should have been done at the last *Chicks & Salsa* show. We should have been done. We just kind of stretched it out.

And then I let it—I had to—I was done. I had to let it go, otherwise I think I would have jumped out a window. And so one person held onto it, where I signed off the checks, was no longer part of it. And then Vivian Varela, my friend, my dear friend, she said, "You guys, you can't let it go. This is ridiculous. [VIVA] still exists." And I was [saying], "I don't care. I'm tired. I went above and beyond." So she held onto it for

a little while, VIVA, and then Roland started talking to the women from Tongues, the Tongues group. And I had heard Roland talking about these women, these young Latina women, who want to take VIVA on, turn it into something else. [I say,] “Please do. By all means.” So then VIVA, Lesbian & Gay Latino Artists, morphed into Tongues. And they just kept the non-profit title of Que VIVA, and so that’s why you’ll see Tongues, a project of Que VIVA.

KMD: Ah. But by that time, you were already—

MP: Yeah.

KMD: Gone out. That’s a clever way of keeping it alive, though.

MP: Yeah, it worked out.

KMD: Because one group didn’t have to get . . . You’re a 501(c)(3).

MP: Yeah. We were thinking of—what do you call that when you stop it—there’s a word, there’s a specific word. To absolve?

KMD: Yeah, something like that.

MP: You take your papers. We’re going to stop it, we’re going to not exist anymore. Okay, sign us off. So yeah. They took it. I was [thinking], “Yay! It didn’t die.”

KMD: Yeah, that’s one way of thinking about it.

MP: It became something else. That’s cool. So yeah, so that’s how—and so they stayed at The Village for a few more years, and then I think last year they were kicked out, politely. Politely kicked out, something like that.

KMD: So you did this kind of LA arts scene for a long time.

MP: Totally, yeah.

KMD: I mean, I know it’s a huge question and genre, because you’re talking about all of the arts, but do you have any observations of that development of the arts? Did you see it grow? Were you excited by new things?

MP: Yeah, there was a lot of stuff happening. There was too many things happening. A lot of interesting one-person shows were coming out left and right, boom, boom, boom. Art exhibits, very interesting artwork. Lot of political stuff. Lot of HIV artists. VIVA sponsored this one guy, first name was Cory, I forget his last name— [Roberts-Auli]. He used his HIV-infected blood, and he either did outlines of bodies, or he sketched bodies—I don’t know what it was, but when he did his performance exhibition installation, he took blood out of—he took his HIV-infected blood out of his arm. And so we told people what was going to happen, and if they would like to wear gloves—so we purposely wore gloves to make it—

KMD: So they could do it too?

MP: To make it a big deal. Pushing the envelope a bit. That was interesting. But yeah, so he’s dead. What’s his name—Gil Cuadros—I forget how you say his last name. He did stuff for VIVA. He’s gone. He’s gone. Teddy Sandoval, very much involved with VIVA—gone. All these really cool artists, they left their mark through VIVA. And that’s what Roland, the founder, that’s—

KMD: What he wanted.

MP: That’s exactly what he wanted to do.

KMD: Well, I guess it makes—I don’t want to make it sound like it was all the other things we were talking about earlier, but you’re talking about creating the archive, you know? Creating the documents to leave a legacy for others to know about. Was there an awareness of that?

MP: Yeah. I mean, we created journals, art journals. I don’t know if you—they have to be at the Center.

KMD: I think they are, but I might have thought of them as something else and didn’t glance at them.

MP: This was one thing that was made through this grant that we got—this is a rare item. They might even have—sorry it’s so dusty, but they might even have that at the Center—that Luis Alfaro put together with—I forget the other gentleman. But it’s just—he got a chunk of money from the city and put it together. Pat Aldrete, various artists.

KMD: Alex Donis, yes. [*referring to photograph*] This is you.

MP: Yeah.

KMD: [*inaudible*] This is what I think—

MP: But we made journals that weren't as expensive as that.

KMD: So I should think of them as different things.

MP: They have to be. If they took all that stuff—it's over there—because I don't even think—I don't even have that, I don't think, unless I put it away somewhere.

KMD: This is closer to what Tongues becomes.

MP: Yeah. So I really felt that through my career, and what I was able to do through VIVA, I really felt that what you see present-day, [for example] the Butchlalis de Panochtitlan girls—women, excuse me, women—what they're doing, and various—you'll see more lesbian performance stuff happening, paintings where there's a mix of—I really think that VIVA influenced, hugely—I think I would say me, Monica Palacios. And VIVA, influenced hugely what you see present-day, performers of the variety show.

KMD: And even the art that becomes—because Miguel and Alex are—

MP: The Zine.

KMD: Well, Miguel less than Alex, but Alex is the successful commercial gallery exhibitor.

MP: Oh, he is?

KMD: Yeah. And Roberto a bit, but not as much. But Miguel's well-known.

MP: Yes.

KMD: He may not have as much sales and commercial galleries, but he's well-known and respected.

MP: Yeah. So a lot of the queer Latino artists of Los Angeles had some type of connection with VIVA.

KMD: Did you get a sense that—was there also a sadness as people were passing away?

MP: Oh, definitely.

KMD: You know, you're doing this good work, but then—did you go to funerals, did people go to funerals?

MP: Oh, Julio Ugay. That was one big artist we got involved with, and he passed away. And a lot of the VIVA people showed up at his memorial, and his family was—I think his family was pissed. I remember saying something, just like, "He was a great friend," and I think I did mention VIVA in my little impromptu speech. Yeah, 'cause pretty much at the same time, they all went.

KMD: Was that part of the burnout?

MP: People dying? No, it was just—the non-profit, one person doing all the work.

KMD: Now, when you talked about non-profits at lunch, I understand it a lot better. I mean, I knew it was a lot you, but I didn't know it was—

MP: It was me.

KMD: Pure you.

MP: It was me.

KMD: Nobody assisting, nobody handing off to.

MP: Yeah. And then also, it was just easier, as opposed to making the phone calls, "Can you help me?" Waiting for people to get back to you. Just going to do it. And I think, "Oh, God. If only I had applied for that grant, we could have done more things." But I mean, I went above and beyond. I left my mark. I know Roland knows that.

KMD: Were you consciously trying to bring in young people?

MP: Yeah.

KMD: I mean, certainly trying to balance with women and men, but the young folks.

MP: Yeah, especially when I started teaching. One of these little young dykelings and gay men, and I go, "Ooh, they'd make a good little show." Young queer folk?

KMD: Now, you've continued that kind of—I call it a mentoring, and it might even be a word you used from *Rocks in My Salsa* production. Did you incubate—

MP: I—Cristina Nava is a perfect example. I met her through UCLA. She was my student—straight woman—but I just made that connection with her. I liked what she wrote; [it] spoke to me. And she was the one that came to me, and we started having these conversations. And I'm [thinking], "I like that girl, she's smart."

And she was always—one thing that really, really stood out to me was that, “I’m tired of the Latinos being in last place.” “Girl, you don’t got to tell me that.” She [says], “Through my work, through my writing, I want to push Latinos forward.” “Me too.” And we just maintained this connection, and I’ve always been a mentor to her, and pushed her. And she’s always helped me with my shows—we’ve always had these conversations about promoting Latinos. “We’re sick and tired of being in the backseat.”

KMD: And so you produced and directed that show?

MP: I—yes. I conceived it. Because I approached her, and I said, “I’m going to write a one-person show for you.” And she was like, “Really?” I go, “Yeah.” So it just started. She came to me as a student, and I gave her a student assignment, as I give all my students, and then it just snowballed. And I got all of her stories, and I just shaped it, as a dramaturge does. And—I feel that I had a hand in writing it as well. But it was her words, and I just shaped it. “Use this word. Don’t use this word.” So I really—I mean, it exists—that show—*Rocks in My Salsa*—exists ‘cause of me. I think she would have done something like it, but not to that degree. And that was the first time that I actually—I had been doing that in teaching performance, I had been, “I’m going to help you do this little ten-minute performance.” I had been doing it on a course level, academic level. But this was the first time that I’d actually went full-blown. We’re going to take it out of the classroom, we’re going to get a venue, we’re going to make it theatrical, baby. We’re going to pump it up.

KMD: So the stuff that you did with VIVA wasn’t as much—I call it directing—you really just produced?

MP: I structured, I structured it. People came with their own material, own poetry, and maybe they ran it by me. There was no time. I was doing so many things, there wasn’t any time for me to go, “Oh, no, change that word.” I might have—I think maybe, “I wouldn’t end with that.” It was really quick, quick, quick. I structured the show. It went in a certain order because of me. “Going to start with you and end with you. Take a break.” Yeah, completely producer. I did that. So hers was truly the first time that I completely had control, control over it. And we worked it. We hooked up in 2004, and then we workshopped it. We presented it as a workshop in 2005, to just—in somebody’s house. And she invited her guests. And then in 2006 was the premiere. Yeah, I mean, I designed the lighting.

KMD: Really?

MP: She came to me with ideas, and I okayed it. And there was a few times—

KMD: Costume and—

MP: And there was a few times when she said, “That doesn’t feel like me.” I go, “Okay. Well, what about this?” Yeah, costume—she goes, “What do you think?” “I think you should wear this, Cristina, because it’s going to enhance this, and I think it’s going to look good as you’re moving over the stage.” I mean, it was—I really—

KMD: That’s actually after the Rockefeller at Santa Barbara.

MP: Yes. This was right after.

KMD: Your kind of sense of directing is growing.

MP: Yes. And that’s also—that’s coming from just being the director in my performance classes as well. My performance, you have to—their final is to present a ten-minute performance piece.

KMD: That’s a lot.

MP: Yep. People got freaked out, yeah. And I see it, and I just go, “No, do this. I don’t like that. It doesn’t feel like you.” As best as I can in a classroom setting. You can’t really give them that much. “No, talk about this. I like it when you do this movement. This is a good thing. This is you; this feels like you more.” It’s quick, directing. [snaps fingers] Quick, quick, quick, quick, quick. Especially, I mean—the performance class, I’ve been teaching it at—mostly at the UC, so that’s ten weeks. That’s quick.

KMD: Yeah. You’ve done the performance at LMU?

MP: Well, the first time was last spring through the—[your] class.

KMD: The class, Chicana/Latina, was it that one? Three-oh-two?

MP: No, uh—

KMD: Oh, no, 404.

MP: Four-oh-four.

KMD: And you'd like to do it your way.

MP: Yeah. That's why I taught that class. "Can I do it my way? Okay."

KMD: So sixteen weeks allows a little bit more—

MP: Oh, God, yeah. They were—that particular class, those students, "We're going to do a performance?" Oh, no, no. So I really, really slowed it down. Took little baby steps, really baby, baby, baby steps.

KMD: Like having them read something in the classroom to—

MP: Just, "Tell me about a funny child incident." I tried to make it as casual as possible. And what usually happened in my performance classes, I work with non-actors. I don't—it's been rare that I have—you know, all the time when I worked at American Academy of Dramatic Arts, I'm working with actors. But I like it; I like working with non-actors, because the stuff that they create is so damn organic and beautiful. It's amazing. And I know, you know—I mean, it's taken them every ounce of courage to do it. I know it's hard, I know it's hard for them. But I just push them. I push them to that place of, "I want to hear this. I don't want to hear this about going on the train ride. Talk about that time your father spoke to you in this tone."

KMD: Did you have a teacher that did that or were your classes more text-based?

MP: A teacher that did—

KMD: That got you to perform.

MP: I didn't take any performance classes. No. My first performance is the first time I'm going onstage as a comic. There was no theater training, no nothing like that. My training was growing up in this quasi-vaudeville, [with] quasi-vaudevillians. Yeah. "Go to a stand-up comedy class." "No," boom. I want to [do] stand-up comedy. Boom, I'm at the comedy club. I'm sure if I had somebody telling me, "Why don't you take an improv class?" But nobody was telling me.

KMD: So your high school writing classes are just creative writing—stories—you never had to read them in class?

MP: Yes, I read them in class. Or my teachers would read them in class. And in high school, I'm also performing in my classroom for no reason.

KMD: For no reason, right.

MP: Nobody's asking me, "Hey, you guys, watch this sketch!" So, the way I learned to be a performance teacher was just—it's all organic. "I think we should do this." One of the assignments for the LMU class, which I made up on the spot, was, "I want you guys to come back with a fairy tale, but with a feminist twist. And I want—you've got to be constantly moving like a fairy tale. If you're talking about the sun, I want you to show me the sun, the rolling hills—you can't be stationary, you've got to keep moving." And it just made sense to me that everybody has read a fairy tale so you know how to do that. Just try to keep it—[in] their world, kind of make it casual and laid back. I don't talk about [*melodramatic accent*] "In the-ah-tah . . ." I don't—

KMD: Well, I would imagine, in a practicum class, that yeah, you just do—in the classes I had, we just—

MP: Yeah.

KMD: That's monologue week. "Read this. Do it."

MP: That is my MO: "Just do it." People ask—I go, "Don't ask questions. Just do it." "But I'm afraid." "I don't care." So it's just neat to see these people. No theater training, and they're doing these amazing things. It's mind-blowing.

KMD: And Cristina didn't have theater training now, or did she?

MP: Cristina? Yes. She did have some classes. She did some community theater, yes. And she teaches it herself. She used to work with Norma Bowles who did that Fringe Benefits, where they go into—they work with kids and teens, and they'd get them to do [a] social justice [themed] sketch, place.

KMD: Actually, I was going to ask you about that. The very first thing that you—the VIVA group got the grant to do this HIV in the bars, to do outreach? Who was doing that, those skits? Was it the guys doing it?

- MP: Yeah, it was three guys. I forget their names. There's a picture of them somewhere. It's a great picture. Ron Sandoval for sure; Ronnie and two other gentlemen.
- KMD: But the text was really by—
- MP: Beto Araiza cranked out a lot of sketches, and then we took those sketches and when he left, we just took those sketches and kind of messed with it. I think I wrote some fresh ones. But just following the guidelines, that "You can do sketches, but talk about this, talk about this, talk about this." And it was interesting because I accompanied the guys at a few of the bars. I didn't have to go with them, but I did. And, 'cause it was mostly late at night, it was eleven o'clock at night. So a few of those times, I felt like a doctor. I would go there, and people would be delighted to see Latinos, queer Latinos, who felt good about themselves, having fun. So then people would come—because I think I would introduce them. Yeah, I would introduce them, because then people would come to me, "Um, do you know what kind of lubrication, do you know what kind of spermicide jelly to be using? I got this rash." "You know what? Take this same information, go to a clinic. They have to help you. Go to this clinic." And we would give them condoms, and maybe we did have like samples of lube. But that just blew me away, that they were asking me these medical questions. It's like, "Wow. They feel safe to talk to me, but they don't feel safe to go into a clinic."
- KMD: Yeah. And hungry, too. Hungry for the information.
- MP: Yes. So it was a big delight, big delight.
- KMD: Well, it sounds much more rewarding than your other earlier experiences with working in groups.
- MP: Yeah.
- KMD: All the things that went wrong—this was all the things that could go right. I mean, I hear it as a kind of spiritual story. Do you have any sense of it as spiritually rewarding? In the broadest sense of the word "spiritual."
- MP: Yeah. I mean, I didn't have to do that. I didn't have to be out there. But these little—a woman who comes up to me, "Hey, could you tell me what kind of spermicide?" Yeah, it is warming. It warms your heart. "Wow, okay. This is a good thing." It's reality. It's a reality check. I think that's what it felt like to me. Fast-paced world of trying to get gigs and doing art events for VIVA, this little moment of shared information, from one Latina to another. Yeah. And then just like, doing *Chicks & Salsa*, it was really chaotic to put it together. It was kind of last minute. We did a lot of things last minute. That just blew me away. It's like, "Wow." People practically are in tears, "We've never been to a thing like this before." "We traveled an hour and a half to be part of it. Are you going to do this again? We hope you do this again." Like, "Thank you so much." Yeah, it is humbling. It is spiritual.
- KMD: You performed in some of them, not all of them, right?
- MP: I performed in all of them.
- KMD: Oh, you did. Oh, okay. I must have missed that part.
- MP: Did it all.
- KMD: Hang the lights? [*laughter*]
- MP: Oh, God, yeah. Mother of the bride, that was me running around.
- KMD: So I guess 2000 becomes actually a little bit more into the twenty-first century, a little bit more breathing room, slowing down, trying to be more normal paced.
- MP: I was—it was a big deal. It was such a huge thing for me. I was VIVA for a long, long time. And I felt I let them [go] because I couldn't carry it anymore. I did feel that for a little bit, I will say that. I was depressed letting go of such a big, big, huge thing. But after I'd gotten over that, it was a relief. I could not do that any longer. It was making me ill. There was mixed emotions. But yeah, I had to really start thinking about me. It's like, "Okay." And I was moving, I moved into this apartment. A lot of stuff was going on. By 2000, I was forty-one, so [I] entered the forties. So yeah, growing up. I was definitely growing up.
- KMD: So this is the kind of space you work in now, your own apartment with your little love notes and your other visual, textual cues. You said Diane described the office space for VIVA as a studio, call it a studio—

[break in audio]

KMD: Okay, so we're side B, tape 2, and I was asking Monica to describe the office space, because I can tell here in her writing environment—

MP: The VIVA office space.

KMD: Mm-hmm. Clearly a writer's place. So what did that place look like?

MP: Not even half this space. On the walls, we would have artwork, various artwork. People would, "Can we hang your artwork?" A couple of desks. And then we used that space a couple of times to have an exhibit. That space became an exhibit space, I think our first. Moved some stuff out—yeah, it was constant. "What kind of space do we have? This space? Okay. We'll turn it into an art gallery." "Art gallery? Give us ten minutes."

KMD: Where'd you learn how to hang art?

MP: The artists who were there, and Diane. Diane had a great eye, great sense of style.

KMD: Would she help arrange the—

MP: Oh, yeah.

KMD: What goes where?

MP: Yes, and why it should go there. Yes, that was neat to learn, to understand that. Even now, I think I could do it, but their sensibility, their visual sensibility, how to hang things. And, you know, "Wow, they're right! That works!" Yeah, that little office space was forever changing. In Silver Lake, people would, "Can we leave this here for a couple of weeks?" [Would say] those things to us.

KMD: Their props?

MP: Yeah, or something.

KMD: And you guys could function in that, because you felt it was a studio? Or because it was just—

MP: Because that was what we had. We used what we had. That's why.

KMD: And the meetings for the board of directors were there too?

MP: Yes. [laughter]

KMD: So you've done probably the most *rasquache* non-profit that I can imagine in the art world, except for operating out of someone's home.

MP: Yeah, we never operated out of somebody's home. It was a little office. And then the office—the Beyond Baroque office was a joke, it was so small. Super small. And then the office space at The Village, that was a nice little space. Small, but a nice little hip happening.

KMD: Did you collaborate with the neighbors down the road at SPARC [Social and Public Art Resource Center] when you were at Beyond Baroque?

MP: I think we might have done something with them, but—I think maybe we might have done something with Beyond Baroque, maybe. We just didn't—by that time, when we were in that space, the momentum had left, and we weren't—it was just hard to—because Luis Alfaro really put us—gave us this momentum. "You guys, you should be doing this. You should be doing this!" But that's how he runs his life.

KMD: Little gopher on a treadmill.

MP: Yes. [laughter] "Luis, why did you say that we were going to [do] that?" He goes, "We have to do that. We have to—it's about visibility. Go back to the mission statement." Yeah. And by that time, too, I'm doing so many things, I'm teaching. And I was [thinking], "I don't know what to do first." I know we should have done more things with Beyond Baroque.

KMD: But also for your own career, because don't you also do work at the Taper, or work with—

MP: Well, because. . . Since Luis became the co-director, him and Dyan were—they gave me a fellowship. I did a few things because of them, and they brought me in as a resident artist. There was a few people—they gave a lot of people some breaks.

KMD: What does it mean, to have a break?

- MP: [I] would like to have had more of a break. Because of them, I cranked out my first multi-character play, *Clock*. And it would have been nice if they had gave me a commission. I cranked it out. We had this big huge reading at Plaza de la Raza—it would have been nice if they would have seen it through—let’s say not even a full production, a full, expensive—but like a workshop production.
- KMD: Oh, you’re willing to go the workshop route. I remember Latino playwrights talking about how “We get workshopped to death. We never get the full production.”
- MP: Yeah, I mean, that’s what I’m saying. “Okay, all right. You don’t have to do the full production. Save that for a British play, because British plays are really important in Los Angeles.” They sell out. But they didn’t do that.
- KMD: What’s a commission like for—what’s a commission mean, that’s paying the rent?
- MP: It depends how much they give you.
- KMD: Oh, okay.
- MP: It depends who they are. They were about getting more people in [rather than] focusing on one or two. Instead of handing out ten thousand dollars, they gave out a thousand dollars to ten people.
- KMD: Yeah, I’m trying to get a sense of—mostly for future reference—you know, how do artist[s] sustain themselves? And it sounds like piecing together. But it also—not like you’re telling a story where—a little bit you said, in terms of maybe a bigger box office cut or something. But it’s not like it’s a growing . . . You can count on more pay—
- MP: More money as your career—
- KMD: Career is developed. You’re a mid-career artist now.
- MP: Not—no. It’s just—it depends. “Well, if I work with—if I take this little gig, they’re going to pay me two hundred dollars.” I could scoff at that, or I could get two hundred dollars. So I might as well get the two hundred dollars. Money is hard to come by. You can’t—perhaps if I had an agent who would wheel and deal for me.
- KMD: Do you have colleagues that have agents?
- MP: Do I? I guess I do. Yeah, I guess I do. *[laughter]*
- KMD: Well, I mean, I know—most of this project is about visual artists, but I’m not aware of many that even have the gallery representation. Just a few of them do.
- MP: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I do know people.
- KMD: So it is heard of, but it’s not like it’s—
- MP: It’s, it’s hard to get somebody who you can depend on, who’s not going to rob you. That’s what scares me. Because, you know, for awhile—I kind of was working with this person, and I thought, “But I’m doing a lot of the work, so why am I even paying . . .?” Then I would hear those stories. “Why am I even paying them? I do most of the work.” I go, “Yeah.”
- KMD: So you had at one point tried to have an agent.
- MP: I kind of looked, but I guess I didn’t look hard enough. I guess there was too many horror stories. I was like, “God, how do I find somebody I really trust. How does one do that?”
- KMD: So you’re getting your own gigs and you’re getting your own self-promotion. It sounds like you’ve learned [a lot] over the years. What would be the three things you’d tell these young folks that are hoping to take up that kind of career?
- MP: The kind of career that I’m doing, or—
- KMD: Yeah, the kind of career you’re doing, which is actually—notice I didn’t label it. *[laughter]* It’s quite diverse. You’re a writer-producer-performer.
- MP: You know, what is it that you’re really passionate about? If you definitely are a writer/performer, then you’re going to have to have things that are ready to go to give to people. You’re not going to talk about stuff. If you are doing a one-person show, make sure it’s good. Don’t—there’s so much trash out there; there’s so much bad performance. But that’s standard. There’s so much more bad than there is good.

Make sure you're doing 100 percent. Don't settle. Don't do mediocre crap. Ugh, God. Mediocre. Stand out a bit. But I think most importantly, just be passionate about it.

KMD: Do you feel like you were taking risks at the beginning?

MP: Oh, totally. Yeah. Even, you know, my family being concerned. "Do you really have to talk about that onstage?" And then my question, [me] going, "Yeah, do I really have to?" It's about me. I do. Okay. Yeah, are people going to really listen to this? I mean, yeah, I felt I was taking a risk every time I went onstage when I was—at the beginning. I went from doing open mic, open mic, to a show that I really wasn't—was I ready for it? I don't know. I don't care. I don't care.

KMD: When did you learn to pick yourself up out from—I don't know if you want to call it a bomb, but a show that didn't go the way you wanted it to?

MP: When I would get offstage and think, "Oh, I sucked," my thought was, "The next time, I'm going to be great." That was—if I had a brain on the other side of my nose, "Next time, I'm going to really kill." That's what I would say to myself. And I would go and figure out, "Okay, why didn't that work?" And somebody would say something simple like, "We couldn't really hear you." Oh, God, that's simple. "Slow down, you're talking too fast. Just slow down." Oh. Okay. "I really wouldn't use that word. That word's not funny. Try this word." Learning what words are funny, what words are not.

KMD: Who are the folks that are giving you that kind of feedback?

MP: I remember one time going to this comedy writing class in San Francisco. It was at the—what was it called? The Zoo, the Comedy Zoo?

KMD: Yeah.

MP: The Comedy Zoo. And it was like twenty-five dollars. It was one day. And I get there, and these comedians—I think I had seen one of them, maybe. There was two of them, a man and a woman, and I remember thinking, when I walked away—I really didn't learn that much. They really weren't that funny. But what I did walk away with—the guy said, "Certain words are funny. Certain words are not. *Couch* is not funny. *Sofa* is funny." It made sense to me. I don't know if it made sense to anybody else. "Sofa. Got it." And it's true.

KMD: Really word-smithing the routine, huh?

MP: So, so true. Like, "nincompoop," that's a funny word. And then I really found out about words—what words are funny, what words are not—when I started really focusing on my writing, submitting my work. And the editors taking the funny out of my work. I had this experience with *Latina* magazine. Great to work for. They pay you—at the time, they paid me a dollar a word, so they paid like eight hundred dollars, which is—that's great. But we were back and forth because one of the things I said was, "It scared the H-E-double-toothpicks out of me." And what does that mean to you?

KMD: Hell?

MP: Yes. They did not get that.

KMD: Everybody knows the expression "H-E-double-toothpicks."

MP: "We don't know that. We don't know." I go, "H-E-double-toothpicks. That means hell. I'm being funny." I got that right off of—actually, I stole that from *Happy Days*. Patsy says that to—

KMD: Exactly, it's part of pop culture.

MP: And they said, "We don't know." They go, "No, we don't—I guess we're not funny. We don't know that." So they put "H-E-double-L." So on this story, it says, "It scared the H-E-double-L out of me."

KMD: Okay.

MP: The other thing that they did was, I say—one of my favorite things to say is, "My funky two-bit Toyota." "Funky two-bit Toyota" is funny. You know what that is. It's this car that's kind of falling apart. So they said, "No. Funky two-bit lemon." That's not funny. So then I really put my foot down when I said, "I was eating the guacamole out of the. . ." My sentence was, "I was eating the guacamole out of the indigenous bowl my grandmother bought me from Wal-Mart."

KMD: [laughter] I love that line.

MP: Setup, setup, setup, joke. Oh, my God. They—and I’m dealing with fax, okay, because I don’t have it together yet to have e-mail. So we’re faxing back and forth. So they have guacamole, indigenous bowl that was purchased at Wal-Mart from my grandmother. It was something that was just out of order.

KMD: Yeah, it has to be that.

MP: I said, “You know what? I’m sorry, I’m putting my foot down. It has to be this way. Do you understand? This is a joke. This is how you write a joke. Setup, setup, setup. I say ‘indigenous’ in the beginning, and it ends with ‘Wal-Mart.’ Do you not. . .?” Oh, man, it was back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

KMD: So you were publishing in—I thought when you said working, trying to publish your stuff, you were talking about like these—you know, like Rebolledo’s book, anthology of Latina writers or something—you were doing the mainstream magazines.

MP: No. Well, yeah. But my first publication came with *Chicana Lesbians*. That came out in ’91.

KMD: Right. Juanita Ramos.

MP: But that was—*Chicana Lesbians*. The author is Carla Trujillo.

KMD: Oh, Carla, not Juanita.

MP: Carla Trujillo, who would come to my first shows, be in the audience. That’s how I met her, because of her laugh. “You have a good laugh. Who are you?” So here’s a woman who knows my work. She didn’t touch anything. And when I look back at that particular print of Llorona’s story, I go, “Um . . .” I change it—when you see me read or perform that story, it’s a little bit different than how it is present-day. But that’s the other person who respects my work and doesn’t want to touch, who knows about comedy, who—

KMD: Right.

MP: Right. And pretty much all my other anthologies, nobody messed with my stuff. It was in—*Latina* magazine, I was like, “Wow, you guys are taking the funny out of my work here.” But other magazines, like *Curve* magazine and *Lesbian* magazine, I don’t even know if it exists anymore. I wrote this Valentine’s Day thing for them, and they—when I saw it in print, I wish they would have told me about it. I think “cheeseless lasagna” is funny. I don’t think “lactose-intolerance”—something just like completely—this is a completely different story. I don’t say “lactose-intolerant.” That’s not funny. It’s too common. It’s too common now. It’s too cliché now. They did some other little things like that that I just really—like ripped it from how I had it. It’s not mine.

KMD: So editors who aren’t—

MP: Who aren’t savvy in comedy. Just don’t get it. And that’s what I stress to my students when I do my Comedy y Cultura class, where they take a funny event and they turn it into a piece of literature, a funny story on paper. And telling them—I shared that story about *Latina* magazine, and I talk about their words or uses of words, and even the three-syllable word as opposed to the one-syllable word. It’s about timing, it’s about rhythm. “There’s too many words in this sentence. It’s too cluttered. It’s not going to work.” So then they listen to me, “Oh, okay.” The word “huge” is fun to say, so when you read it, say it “hu-uge.” Don’t just throw it away and say “huge.” Say “hu-uge.” Little things like that that make, you know, [make] all the difference. This latest book that came out in June—

KMD: Oh, yeah.

MP: Use this in your class, please.

KMD: *Fifteen Candles*. I thought it was going to be called “Quinceañera,” but it’s “and Other Quinceañera Stories.” [The title is *Fifteen Candles: Fifteen Tales of Taffeta, Hairspray, Drunk Uncles, and Other Quinceañera Stories*—ed.]

MP: Yeah.

KMD: [Rayo] is the press.

MP: Yeah. But HarperCollins—

KMD: Oh, it’s the HarperCollins imprint.

MP: Yeah.

KMD: Wow.

- MP: So this is my most mainstream publisher, this book here. It's getting some pretty good feedback and reviews.
- KMD: Okay, I might be able to find your—oh, there you are. "The dress that was way too itchy." [*laughter*] [The title is "The Dress Was Way Too Itchy"—ed.]
- MP: And you know, overall, my story stands out the most. It's just—it's different. Because my story is about me getting out of a *quinceañera*, and what happens before the *quinceañera*, and then what happens at this particular *quinceañera*. I end up going—first, my friend wanted to be in it, wanted me to be in it, and I was like, "Oh, I can't do it because I'm allergic to the dress." Just so ridiculous.
- KMD: I just reviewed a book, Julia Alvarez, the writer, wrote one on *quinceañeras*. It's like a true story, it's not a—
- MP: Yes. And actually, there's a review that talks about hers and it talks about this book. I forget where, maybe San Francisco.
- KMD: So I guess it's the hottest—next biggest thing. When I do the Chicana/Latina course, I was going to use all that *quince* stuff, because—I've actually written about *quinceañeras*, ethnographically. So I'd like to be able to do like a whole—wouldn't it be great? I have a class on Guadalupe, and now I could do a class on *quinceañeras*? And at the end, we could have—
- MP: Yeah. That's cool. At LMU?
- KMD: Oh, yeah. At LMU. I mean, my colleague does the Guadalupe class at Berkeley, Laura Pérez. But she does it Guadalupe, Tonantzín, something—I can't remember what the third name is. And I do that in the course of the semester. We do the Tonantzín and we break down Guadalupe, but the class starts out innocently enough, to bring them in. I'd like to be able to do that with the *quinceañera* stuff.
- MP: Yeah. I mean, there's a lot of story, there's lots of stuff in there. But I was just happy [to be in it]. She goes, "Can you pitch us a story? We really would love to hear . . ."
- KMD: Oh, so this is an original work for this publication.
- MP: Yes.
- KMD: Wow.
- MP: This came to me last summer, last minute, and I thought, "Okay. This is what I want to write about." And I'm also—this is '74, and I'm totally—it's my perspective—it's pretty much true. And I'm alluding to my homosexuality. Because I don't know—
- KMD: "I won't use it in the course if I can't change the notion of a *quinceañera* by the end of the semester," right?
- MP: This is my—look at my. . . [*referring to photograph*]
- KMD: Ooh, you're so cute.
- MP: [*inaudible*] It's just so perfect because it has the early, [*inaudible*] haircut.
- KMD: Those are the little pooka shells, right?
- MP: No, they're not pooka shells. I made that choker.
- KMD: With wooden beads?
- MP: They're glass.
- KMD: Glass. Oh, you were hip.
- KMD: [*overlapping dialog*] Definitely. But you're right in the time.
- MP: Oh, God, yeah.
- KMD: Yeah. But I was thinking they'd be wood or something like that.
- MP: So that was fun to write. That was really fun to write. Because I had been wanting to write about this time period, and—read that, it's a short film. It's like, "Oh, this is filmic. Okay, I can see it."
- KMD: Can I read it tonight? Are you going to let me read it? I just finished her other book, so it'd be nice to read this. Non-fiction humor.
- MP: Are we at a breaking point?
- KMD: Yeah, I think I'm done.

MP: I killed you.

AUGUST 14, 2007

KMD: This is August 14, [2007,] Karen Mary Davalos interviewing Monica Palacios in her home in Los Angeles. Monica, I wanted to ask you some questions about your family, and I wanted to start with some basic—you know, where'd your parents grow up, and were they born in the U.S., and what kind of schooling did they have?

MP: My father was born in Chihuahua, Chihuahua. We always like to say that combination. It's fun. And he came here, as many of the people [did] during this time—he was born in 1915—isn't that forever ago? [laughter] Because of the Mexican Revolution, they all came to New Mexico. So by the age of two, he was in the U.S.

KMD: And your mother?

MP: And my mother was born in New Mexico, this super-small town. I believe it's called Carthage, and I believe it's next to—near the vicinity of Albuquerque. And so the Palacios came over to this Albuquerque area, and met up with the Cruz—the Cruzes. And they were childhood friends for the longest time. My father is eight years older than my mom, so she was a young-un in his eyes for the longest time, and then—presto, change-o, she became a woman. And things started to happen, and they connected.

And this is an interesting story: My parents decided to elope, and my mom used the excuse of, she was going to go pick up some mail at the post office, wink-wink. And she left the house, and off they went. And I forget—I guess because he was so much older than her, but yet my grandparents knew his family, they knew him. So I forget why it was so scandalous, but that's what they did.

KMD: But there was a sense of scandal.

MP: Yeah. Yeah, so—

KMD: Did they leave town then?

MP: Did they? I guess so. That little whole chunk of time is drawing a blank, because my mom has told me this a few times. And then right away he was drafted to World War II. Ancient time. Yeah, and he left—they got married, and then I think within months he left. And from there, my mom's family's living there and my dad's family's living there. And then little by little, everybody is migrating to the Bay Area, specifically to pick fruit, and [find] new opportunities. So little by little, they're going over there.

KMD: And he comes—

MP: And he comes back because my sister was born—the first child, Clara. He comes back, I think, for a couple—maybe a couple of weeks, and then he goes back. And by this time, my mom is in—is she in San Jose? No, my sister Clara was born in New Mexico. And then quickly after that, her and my mom—I think they had a little luggage, and a cousin of hers, they traveled by train to the Bay Area. San Jose. And some of the Palacios are already there, and I believe they own homes. Some of them have just bought some homes. And so they're telling my mom, "Come on." And they're calling—my mom at that point is called Rosa, even though I grew up knowing that her name was Rose, she is called Rosa [by] everybody—and when my dad would be a little bit angry, a little bit angry at her, he would call her "Rosario," and we'd go, "Uh-oh."

KMD: Do you remember the change, or just—that's just the way it was when you grew up?

MP: As far as . . .

KMD: Her name change.

MP: No—well, I just would always know that her Spanish-speaking friends, her Mexicano friends, would call her Rosa, and her sisters would call her Rosa, but she went by Rose. And when I talked about my parents in school, it was Rose. My father's, his name was Guadalupe. And that was always a big thing to say for me, it was like, "Gosh, I wish my dad's name was Tom or Johnny." *Guadalupe*. But that name was—I mean, he wasn't the only person with that name, so I kind of heard that name a lot. But I remember that being the

kind of thing—my mom having this so-called “normal” name of Rose, and my dad’s [name was] Guadalupe.

KMD: You didn’t grow up speaking Spanish.

MP: No, no. It was used against us, so that we wouldn’t know what they were talking about.

KMD: But your Spanish is impeccable, the pronunciation.

MP: Well, see, people think that I am bilingual—I’ve just been faking it all these years. I hate to divulge that. Yeah, so—because by the time we were—we came around, because there’s two—they’re two little families. There’s my older siblings, and then there’s a seven-year span, and then there’s—my brother and I were born. And by that time, my parents are assimilated, and just tired. [*laughter*] And they just, “Whatever. We’re not going to force you to speak Spanish.” I think I’ve heard stories where Spanish was somewhat spoken when the older kids were born and growing up. By the time we come around—

KMD: Everybody’s speaking English.

MP: Yes. Everybody is speaking English.

KMD: So your older brothers and sisters don’t have some fluency, or—

MP: Yes. No, my older brothers and sisters are bilingual.

KMD: Oh, they are. Oh, okay.

MP: Probably—my eldest brother probably is the least, I’m going to say, compared to my other three older sisters. Just basically, their business had them speaking Spanish.

KMD: So you—

MP: So I mean, yeah. I’m—I was hearing Spanish growing up, and knowing that you had to pronounce things in certain ways, and roll your *r*’s, which was always fun. *Hombre* and *carro* and all that stuff. And my brother and I would pretend to speak Spanish in our own little annoying way.

KMD: What did you do?

MP: You know, *hombre, hombre, paga la luz*. Just dumb things like that. And we would hear Spanish music. My father, the pseudo mariachi, would always have music playing. And music—Spanish music, you’re listening to it twenty-four hours a day, you hear it. You go, “Oh, okay. I understand.” And that was one of my big jobs, to listen. Since I wasn’t—I was pretty shy, so I was always listening to whatever was going on. And I think that was me, my writer self as well, listening. I think I’m pretty good at writing dialogue now because I listen a lot.

KMD: Why do you call your father a pseudo mariachi?

MP: Because he had the guitar but not the outfit. He didn’t do it professionally. He did it—he was a self-taught musician, [a] self-taught singer. The man was always singing. My dad was the original iPod; he was a jukebox. At any given moment, boom, drop into a song for no reason. And I liked that, and I do the same thing now. So, we had various instruments in the house: [a] piano, he had his guitars. He would take us to music shops. We would just—he’d pick up the guitar and play it, or he would take us just to hang out, and we’d buy strings for his guitar. So going to music shops is really special to me.

KMD: Do you remember which ones?

MP: The ones in downtown San Jose. I don’t know—First Street, I don’t know their names. But just basic shops. And my elder brother is also in a band at this time when we were growing up, so I would go with him to music shops.

KMD: What kind of music is he playing?

MP: He’s playing contemporary R & B music at this time, and—not rock and roll.

KMD: Is it like a garage band, or is it?—I don’t know if that’s the right word for that time.

MP: I guess it originally starts as a garage band, but they’re getting bookings, and people are coming to the Tonga Lounge in Eastside San Jose to see them, and various—you know, they’re getting bookings at weddings, and what have you.

KMD: Is that a real place, the Tonga Lounge?

MP: Yes. I don’t know if it still exists, but—

KMD: What was that like?

MP: Tonga Lounge? It was [a bar]. But I was—I just found out a couple months ago that during this time, Sarah Vaughan and her band came to one of his venues, and they didn't have a bass player, and my brother's band was the house band. And so Sarah Vaughan—he met Sarah Vaughan and the band, and they asked him if he could join the band for that [set], join Sarah Vaughan and her orchestra for that night. And could he read sheet music—and he couldn't read sheet music, so he had to give that spot up to the guitar player in his band, because he could. And I didn't know that! "You met Sarah Vaughan? Wow! How exciting!" But he says—he goes, "You know what? I should have just said yes and faked it, because I would have been able to have just joined them." So yeah, I liked that. I liked that there were these musicians, and music was constantly playing in my house, that music and singing has greatly influenced my performance. And I think if become—come out of my singer closet, I think I would sing a lot more.

KMD: Yeah, because I've seen three of your performances, actually. I went through your resume, and I read every line, and matched up with my own time. And I was like, okay, I saw you at Stanford when you were part of Culture Clash. That's what I figured out. That was the first time. Then it was Josie's Juice Joint, and then at MALCS [Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social], and—actually, I guess four, MALCS and NACCS events. So I've never heard you sing.

MP: Oh, really? That's interesting—

KMD: Well, it's musical.

MP: Because I always try to sneak in a song or two in each show.

KMD: There's like—yeah.

MP: Yeah, I know. I did a tribute to Bobby Darren, Doris Day. Yeah, that singing—

KMD: Well, I guess you used the range of your voice, but I don't remember singing.

MP: Yeah. And you know, I fantasize about having a little trio behind me while I do performance, and I could just break into song. Yeah, that's a big turn-on for me, absolutely. But it's—trying to fix the logistics of everything. How do you get three musicians together? I can barely get my own self onstage sometimes. It's a hard thing. But that's a fantasy.

And the couple of times in my show throughout my career, I've had—one time, when I was just first starting out, I had a saxophone player, because I was—I picked up the sax at one point, and when I started doing standup, I had a saxophone player, then me, saxophone-light—that was me, saxophone-light—and a bass player. And that was fun. That was a show that I called, *Monica Palacios Does Her Mexican Thing*. [laughter] And that was a really fun night. And then another time, I've had a violin player and a drummer accompany me—two instruments that you wouldn't normally think would make a good combo, but I made it happen.

KMD: And did you pick the music and—

MP: Yeah. Yes, yes. I create a show, and then I think, "I think some drums in the background will sound good." Because you have to remember, I—well, I don't know if you have to remember, but I grew up with my little brother playing the drums, so I know what drums can do. And my father, he didn't play the violin on a regular basis, but he does play the violin in my upbringing. And my older sisters plays the violin—I don't really hear her practice that much, but I—it's there, it exist[s]. And then I hear violins on the radio.

KMD: And mariachi style.

MP: Yeah. And so I'm going, "Hmm. Okay, the sound of violins I think would be good here." And then when I finally—the first time that I had a violin and a drummer together, we would be rehearsing, and I would say, "Can I have a little . . ." And I would do it, a little violin kind of *tee-dee-dee* type of thing. "Can you do that, keep that? And then the drum . . ." So I was composing, and that's because of my father. That's his influence. So music is super important. And my present-day project, my screenplay—that thing's going to be loaded with music. And the music that I hear for that is Trio-style, like Trio los Panchos, and Los Tres Diamantes—I want that type of music in there. I had no idea what the legalities of it all—is it going to come out to, but that's what I really want. I want that style of music. So when I'm writing, as the screenplay and

the other work that I'm writing, whatever music I hear in my head, I will play that constantly, over and over and over again. It's a soundtrack. It's my rehearsal soundtrack. That inspires me.

KMD: You—literally, you play it while you're—

MP: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

KMD: Okay. Now I'm just imagining that you're actually playing on the stereo—

MP: No, no. Look at the stereo system.

KMD: Yeah, you got the stereo—

MP: Close by, like a DJ, play it over and over again. Because that works, that really works for me. Or the other thing that I like that I do is I'll—I hear a new song, I'm driving in the car and I hear a new song, and I just—it just really clicks in my brain, and a story starts to happen in my brain. I can't help it. I just—I just go there.

KMD: And what do you do with those? Do you write them down later?

MP: Yeah, I just—yeah, I just write them down.

KMD: Do you keep like a book of—

MP: You know what, I would like to say that I have stacks and stacks of journals. I don't.

KMD: Why do you say that? Because that'd be [the] expectation of a writer?

MP: Yeah, because people—it just cracks me up about—when I sit on panels that have to do with writers, and everybody else who's there on this panel, distinguished writers, they say they wake up at five o'clock and have their coffee at five-fifteen. They have these rituals of writing, and the journals and the tape recorders. And then they come to me, I go, "Uh . . . I don't know. Whenever I get an idea, I just . . ." I don't know, I guess for me, keeping a journal is just too much of a commitment.

KMD: Well, obviously you don't lack for ideas.

MP: Right. Right, right.

KMD: You're hearing them in the music, on the radio, you know.

MP: Absolutely. And one of my biggest fantasies is to create a musical. I think I could do it.

KMD: Now, I have to ask you, are you joking or are you serious?

MP: No, I'm totally serious.

KMD: What kind of musical?

MP: I mean, I've often thought about the history of my family coming to California. And that's as far as I get, you know. I could see taking stuff that I'd already written that I'd been using for years, putting it into a musical format. It sounds huge, but really, when you break it down and you look at my work, you go, "Oh, okay. I can see how you would just slide it over to being a musical." Making up songs. Because my brother and I, literally, as a kid—we would make up songs.

KMD: Did the other older set do that as well?

MP: Not that I know. Not that I know of.

KMD: Were they going with you to church with your father? They were—

MP: The older kids?

KMD: Yeah.

MP: Yeah. I guess—but it's mostly—what I remember mostly, it's my brother Greg and I, my mom, and my dad. The four [of us]. The quartet going to various things consistently. Whereas my older brothers and sister would—if they were home, if they woke up early enough Sunday morning, they'd go to church, Mass, with us.

KMD: So, you told me your dad was singing in the Mass and leading the Mass, and—

MP: Yeah, playing his guitar with his *compadres*. It was a Spanish-speaking Mass. And then he was leading the Mass, the emcee of the Mass, doing stage work, doing performance. So I'm sitting in the audience going, "Hey, my dad's a performer." I'm liking that. I'm liking what he's doing.

KMD: Do you remember—I mean, what's the sense of him being a performer? Are people—he walks in a room, and all the heads are turning. He's kind of like this popular guy in the congregation . . .

- MP:** Yes. It's not to the degree where a movie star walks into a room, but he was just a very charismatic guy, very social. Happy go lucky. He did have this light around him. He was a really cool guy, fun to be with. And I kind of felt like he was my buddy, I was his buddy. And I touch upon this in my screenplay that I'm writing—the father-daughter relationship. And I want this relationship to come across as they're friends, they're buddies. I would assist my dad changing the oil in his car.
- KMD:** Was Greg there too?
- MP:** No. *[laughter]* My little brother Greg is doing other things. I'm very much my father's daughter. But not a princess. I was the tomboy, I was the sidekick. That's—there you go.
- KMD:** So what else did he teach you to do?
- MP:** Music. Ukulele, piano, guitar. And *[he]* just encourage[d] me to pick up an instrument. That's what he did, because he played by ear. And so I can play by ear as well. I can sit in front of a piano and just kind of figure things out. So that's one thing. And definitely about the car—how a car works—how to change your oil. Just telling me, "It's not hard. You should know how to do this. What if you've got a flat tire on the road?" "Okay." So he would show me how to do it. And the other thing that would just fascinate me to no end was when he would resole his shoes. *[laughter]* I feel like I'm going back to the eighteenth century, this is so old. He would have work shoes and he would resole them. Just the whole process of it, how he would, "Step one: first, take this new sole and do this, rub some cement glue on it . . ."
- KMD:** He's using leather, or other pieces of, like, rubber for shoes?
- MP:** Yeah, rubber. But I would just love to watch him go through the process of things, when he would change a tire. "Okay, this is what you would do first. Step one. " And I would just be fascinated with how things work, basically.
- KMD:** Was he a storyteller, or did you just have an incredible attention span?
- MP:** Was he a storyteller? Um . . . I guess somewhat. He was singing a lot, and he would take time and read us—well, this is what he would do—he would sing us stories. We would get out our Aesop's Fables book, and he would say, "So, Goldilocks walks down to the forest . . ." And he would sing it. That's what he would do. Oh, my God, I can't believe I forgot that. And then, that's what I do. He would sing the song, and he would—and then—this is one of best parts that my brother and I would just love, and when we think about it now, we'd crack up. He would finish at the end of the page, and then he would go, *[singing]* "Turn the page." And so we would turn the page. *[laughter]* Oh, my God. Yes. That was an adorable time. Just think—I mean, 'cause there he was, right? He was with his guitar, he'd be in our bedroom, 'cause Greg and I shared a bedroom. And he'd be singing *[to]* us and telling us the story. Singing, telling the story. How cool is that?
- KMD:** Sounds like an incredibly stable, happy family.
- MP:** It was. Yes, yes. Definitely. Absolutely. I felt very much loved and adored, absolutely. Definitely.
- KMD:** What about your oldest sister?
- MP:** My eldest sister? Clara, yes.
- KMD:** Mm-hmm. Clara.
- MP:** She's like a second mom to me. Definitely. My earliest memories are of her coming home from her job—I think she worked at a bank, and she would either have little toys for us—just little things, not expensive things, just something—or she would take my brother and I out with her boyfriend at the time (who becomes her husband), take us out.
- KMD:** To—oh, just to go do something fun.
- MP:** Burgers, or movies, just—yeah.
- KMD:** A source of entertainment?
- MP:** Yeah. So my older sister is definitely like a mom. And she still is.
- KMD:** Did she scold you?
- MP:** Probably. But not in—I don't remember an ugly way. Just—yeah. What I recall is being loved and having a good time and enjoying life.

KMD: And so Clara's the oldest, and then there's—

MP: Next is Art.

KMD: Art.

MP: Who's the guy who plays in a band, bass player in a band. And then after him is Eleanor, who's ten years older than me, and she's the other lesbian. And then there's my sister Marty.

KMD: So Eleanor and Marty become more like sisters, then?

MP: Yeah. And they're older, and I don't see them as much. They're there, and they go to Notre Dame, the same high school that I go to. So I see them as—they're my sisters, but they're adults, and I see them in their adult world, getting ready for events. Putting on makeup, which I adored watching—they getting ready to go out, that was always fun.

KMD: Standing at the bathroom mirror watching them.

MP: Yes. "I wish I could put curlers in my hair! Wow." Or their friends and our close cousins would come over and they would dance. They would play records and dance, which was another thing that I loved watching. Wow.

KMD: So no one ever thought, "Oh, Monica, there she is again underfoot."

MP: No. No.

KMD: Wow.

MP: No. Just a few times when I would—because for the longest time, I didn't have a bed for myself. I slept with various people various nights of the week. I do remember sweating a lot. And I know a couple of times, my sister Eleanor, I had slept with her, she goes, "God, you sweat too much. You can't sleep here. Go sleep on the couch." And I thought, "You know what? I do sweat a lot. I'm going to sleep on the couch. Okay." That—but even that was tame. It wasn't like, "You disgusting little sister, you're gross, you're a sweaty pig. Go sleep on the couch."

KMD: Your brothers and sisters didn't fight, huh? No more than—

MP: I don't really—see, I don't really recall. I don't recall anything ugly. And then it's not until I am older and I go to St. Patrick's School—I'm ten years old—where I'm seeing more families come together, and I'm hearing more stories about families, and I hear things. "Oh, yeah, my brother and I got into this fistfight." And I would be utterly shocked. "Your brother and you got into this fistfight? Fist as in punched him in the face?" "Yeah." "Why?" "Because he stole my lunch money."

KMD: And that made no sense to you.

MP: It was unfathomable to me. I just didn't—I didn't understand it. Or—just hearing about parents fighting in front of their kids, raised—you know, the voices are raised. It just freaked me out. And then to be near that, to see that when it's happening—over at a friend's house—that would just mess me up for a while. I didn't have that. I didn't have that type of violence in the family at all.

KMD: So you're traveling with your dad and mom and your brother on the weekends to different churches, because he's playing—

MP: Yes. And this is pretty much [the] Bay Area and central California—Modesto.

KMD: Oh, so some of these are trips.

MP: Yeah. But that's what my dad—my dad is an adventurer, so it's fun to him. So he's trying to instill that in us. "It's fun to you guys too, right?" "Yeah, kind of, Dad."

KMD: So going to church is kind of fun.

MP: Yes.

KMD: It's not a drag, it's not—

MP: Yes. Church—going to church is a fun thing. I like the music; my father's playing it. I like watching my father onstage. And then when we go to the folk Mass, there's some pretty hip songs happening there. My dad is not in that group of musicians, but we'll go to that Mass, and there's some hip songs happening.

KMD: Because this is after Vatican II—

MP: Yes.

KMD: So we've got contemporary music coming into the church.

MP: Oh, yes. And also, too, what happened big time for our parishes, we go from the original venue, which looks old, turn-of-the-century type of architecture, to brand new: hip, happening, modern, beautiful—

KMD: Built a new parish?

MP: Yeah. And there was this big deal about what kind of crucifix we should have. Should we have Jesus bloody, dying on the cross, standard? Or should we get this hip, happening—just a cross? And I think maybe a sculpture of a Jesus type of body. High art. And so we go from [the] old, conservative, stifling look, to hip, happening, modern. We're singing modern songs. I thought was—to me, that was, “Hey, yeah, I go to church, and I'll continue to go to church. It's hip.” And we also had, where the confessions, where you would sit down with the father face-to-face—

KMD: At a table. Boy, you were at a modern church. [*laughter*] So your sense of Catholicism isn't very stifling at this point.

MP: No, no. As a child, it never was. My involvement with Catholicism as a child is fun. I think that's an appropriate word.

KMD: Joyful, maybe.

MP: Joyful, happy.

KMD: And you go to public school at first?

MP: I go to public school from kindergarten to fourth grade, and then in the fourth grade, my teacher, Mr. Hammer, tells my mom at a conference, “Take her out of here. She's smart, she needs to be at a private school. But also, these schools right now are very dangerous. Take her out. Take her and her brother out. I'd do it ASAP.” My mom spoke with other families at that same area, and they figured it out to get us—all the families into St. Patrick's School, that was downtown. We had to travel—not miles and miles, but—whereas the public school that we were going to was at the end of our block. So now we had to carpool downtown to Los Angeles, so we did that—my brother and I did that with the Gonzalezes, and they were eight kids.

KMD: Eight.

MP: Eight kids. [*laughter*] And they were such an exaggerated version of family. Oh, my gosh, they just cracked us up to no end. Everybody had a nickname. They were constantly arguing with one another, but you could tell they very much loved—lots of love in that family.

KMD: So that was your transportation to and from school?

MP: Yes, we would carpool. I think my dad maybe sometimes would take us, and—or the Gonzalezes would take us and my dad would pick us up.

KMD: Does that mean your mother didn't drive?

MP: Correct, yeah. My mom did not drive and still does not drive. There was no need for her to drive. She just didn't want to—

KMD: She walks to the grocery store, she walks—

MP: Yes, she walked, and we walked with her. We're her little mules. [*laughter*] “Carry these.”

KMD: Right.

MP: But it's fun. It's not—and then a few times, we walked from my house on the east side to my sister's house that was about an hour away. We'd walk early in the morning when the sun wasn't too hot. And the prize was, when we get there, “We'll go to McDonald's.” McDonald's was always the prize, the goal. [*laughter*] McDonald's of all places. Yeah, we loved that. We grew up on it.

KMD: So your mother doesn't work while you're—I guess she doesn't enter the labor force.

MP: She doesn't enter the labor force, but she gets these little temp jobs with her *comadres* doing some janitorial work here and there, [at] office buildings. And I believe . . . My father expresses that he doesn't want—he misses her, he doesn't want her to work. And he doesn't do it an ugly way, it's just, “You know, you don't really need to work, honey.” He called her “honey” a lot. And this is where my father—and I remember one of the reasons that my father is singing his guitar and telling us stories is because she's not home. So, yeah, I remember that. I remember her being gone a few times.

KMD: He's putting you to bed but not making dinner?

MP: Because my mom has probably left us dinner.

KMD: Right.

MP: Yeah. My mom completely ran the show, definitely.

KMD: Did she make your clothes?

MP: No. No, my mom does not have a sewing machine, doesn't want to sew. No, doesn't make us clothes.

KMD: But she's cooking and cleaning for the family? She's—

MP: Oh, cooking, yes. Cooking three times a day.

KMD: Hot breakfast.

MP: Oh, yeah. Whatever we wanted, pretty much.

KMD: Everybody gets to order something differently? *[laughter]*

MP: Um . . . Yeah, I guess.

KMD: I do mean to make it sound, like, we had the same thing, my mother did the same thing.

MP: Yeah. And as she speaks about it now, she goes, "I loved doing that." It wasn't—nobody was forcing me. I grew up with a mom who did that. I did that. That's what I did. It made complete sense to her. And one of my fondest memories is when—every now and then, she'd make us pancakes in the shape of things. That was—

KMD: Oh, wow.

MP: That was really sweet. "Can you make us an airplane, Mom?"

KMD: Oh, you're kidding. *[laughter]* I'm thinking it's just Mickey Mouse, you know.

MP: No, no, no. Just simple—it was simple things. "A 747, Mom!" *[laughter]* "A Stealth, Mom." No, just simple little things. So is that part of my mom's little hidden art, the artist in her? And that's why we drew, or—or she's just being adorable.

KMD: She sounds very caring.

MP: Oh, absolutely. My gosh, absolutely. And then, you know, again, when I would hear other kids say, "Yeah, no, my mom works, so we have to make our own breakfast. We've never had a pancake." "Never had a pancake?" "No, because nobody can make it." "You've never had a pancake?" It was just—again, not understanding the connection between parent and child.

KMD: So hot breakfasts—she's not getting them out of a box, she actually makes it?

MP: Yeah. And my dad would make us pancakes, but he called them hotcakes, and they were a little bit crispier than my mom's.

KMD: Is that a complaint or an observation? *[laughter]*

MP: Observation. "Dad, they're a little bit burnt. Little bit." Yeah, another thing that is so clear in my head is my dad would wake up early, because I believe he had to [leave by] six o'clock, maybe, or six thirty, to go to his job, so he'd be up by five-ish, and the radio would be super-loud—Spanish station—so a super-loud Spanish station. I don't know if you've ever experienced that at five o'clock in the morning. *[laughter]*

KMD: Yes. Sure have. *[laughter]*

MP: It's a very shrill sound. *[laughter]* And we were getting up and telling, "Dad, could you put it down just a little bit?" "What?" *[laughter]* And then since I'd be up, maybe I would have a bowl of cereal with him, and I remember he liked hot milk, so it would be like hot milk in your Cheerios. That was always—that was fun, that was a fun thing. And then go back to bed. But yeah, that shrill Mexican music at five o'clock or five thirty in the morning.

KMD: Where's he going off to work?

MP: He's going to FMC [Food Machinery Corporation]. And I believe FMC was a precursor to Lockheed and big, huge corporations like that. I know that his job is that he drills holes in the tanks, and I always thought that was really interesting. "That's all you do all day long, Dad, is drill holes?"

KMD: A machinist.

MP: Yes, a machinist. “Yes, I drill holes.” “Oh, wow.” And I believe he had that job for at least twenty-five years, maybe a little bit longer.

KMD: That’s an excellent job for buying a house and saving money.

MP: Yeah. But before he got that job, his relatives are buying homes, and I believe that’s fruit-picking money. I don’t think anybody had a good job like him. That’s fruit-picking, doing whatever type of job money. So—

KMD: Saving.

MP: Saving, and maybe veteran?

[*break in audio*]

KMD: [This is Karen Mary Davalos with Monica] Palacios on August 14, and Monica was telling me about her father, his work, and the family buying homes in San Jose, California.

MP: Yeah, so I knew cousins and parents’ friends owning homes.

KMD: And some of them are going to private school with you?

MP: Yes. Yes, and these are people from our parish, Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, who have figured out—this is the mid-’60s, late ’60s—I guess more so late ’60s, and they’re realizing, “These are turbulent times. Let’s get the kids out.” And I was asking my mom, “Gosh, how’d you guys afford that?” And she said, “I think we paid monthly,” paid monthly tuition [as opposed to] one big chunk. I think it was a monthly thing, and I believe they also had, “We can give you—if you need assistance, can you come in and volunteer and do things at the church?”

KMD: Well, was she involved at the school?

MP: She had to have been.

KMD: Like a PTA, or—

MP: She had to have been, yeah. She had to have been. So maybe she did come in and sell the burgers once every three weeks, or—

KMD: Well, what was your elementary school like? Was it a mixed school, or—

MP: The St. Patrick’s or the public school?

KMD: Middle school, I’m sorry. The middle school, yeah.

MP: That’s St. Patrick’s. It was a mix. It was the new Latino, new Chicano—specifically—wave. [It was also] Italian Americans, Irish Americans, maybe a smattering of African American kids.

KMD: At the time, did you have a sense that it was a mixed school, or was that just looking back, realizing?

MP: Yeah. I mean, it was— I knew that there were less Latinos as compared to my public school days—it was a majority Latino kids. So that was definite. And also, too, hardly any—at St. Patrick’s—maybe one or two black kids. Whereas my public school, I think Latinos were first, and then the African American kids were, percentage-wise, second.

KMD: Did you have a sense that, you know, this is growing up in a time where being Mexican is not very—well, I don’t even know if it’s valued now, but . . . [*laughter*] Did you have a sense that you’re Mexican and some people might not respect that?

MP: I was—yes, I was starting to feel that, being more aware of that.

KMD: How’d that happen?

MP: That probably—I guess through St. Patrick’s, just seeing more white kids there, and just feeling different. But I think I’m feeling different because, (a) I’m an artist, (b) I’m queer, and I don’t know it, I just feel different. I felt different in my body. I felt different—I’m not giggly like the girls.

KMD: But you already know it’s not just because you have this tomboy experience with your dad. It’s something else?

MP: And I see—I see the white girls huddle. They’re huddling. And I guess I’m trying—I’m figuring things out. What’s that about? And I think my brownness—and I’m a light-skinned brown girl. Because I would imagine—I don’t remember specifically, but I would imagine that being in this new school, they’re probably asking me, “What are you?” That question that I get throughout my childhood, “What are you?”

And my first response is, “Well, I’m a girl, dummy. Can’t you tell?” “Oh, no, no, but what are you? What’s your nationality? Where’d you come from?” “Here? I was born here.” Just really needing to know where my family comes from, and me feeling “Here, California. This is my state.” And then their other response would be, “Oh.” The other question was, “What part of Spain are you from?”

KMD: A polite question.

MP: As opposed to, “Are you Mexican, or Chicana?” No, it’s, “What part of Spain are you from?” “I was just born in California. What do you think?”

KMD: So that’s happening—

MP: I think that’s when that’s happening. And I would imagine that the curriculum has to involve stuff about identity. I can’t really—it’s not coming to me.

KMD: But by high school, these things were very certain? You know you’re Mexican. You have a sense that some people don’t really like that.

MP: Yes. And actually—so in high school, I’m going to the private Catholic girl high school—what really happens in high school is you have the hard-core Chicanas who are separate. Let’s say there’s about five of them who hang out. And then there’s chicks like me. I have Chicana friends, and I have white friends, I have black friends, I have Italian American friends, I have Irish American friends. And I will—and I get harassed by the hard-core Chicanas, because I think they—they probably even call themselves that, “hard-core Chicanas.”

And they would say things like, “Hey, Monica, how come you don’t hang out with us?” Which I kind of touch upon in that short story. And I would say, “Well, you guys don’t really like what I like. You’re not into sports, you’re not into performing and theater.” “How come you have white friends?” “How come you don’t?”

KMD: And these girls—what are the different kinds of kids in school? I mean, now you talk—I don’t even know what they talk about, actually. Four years ago, I knew what they called them. There was the surfer dudes, and the goth, and the whatever, right? So what were the—

MP: I think those hard-core Chicanas were called *cholas*.

KMD: They were *cholas*.

MP: I think they called themselves—I believe they called themselves *cholas*. But they weren’t really *cholas*. They weren’t really, you know, by the definition of *cholas*. They were going to a private school. But they definitely wore a lot of—

KMD: The makeup?

MP: Makeup. They had that Chicana—traditional Chicana accent, very hard. And they were always just kind of—they looked pissed off all the time.

KMD: Tough.

MP: Tough, yes. That is the word that we used a lot, tough. Yes. And they would glare at me, but I didn’t understand it, so I kind of didn’t really take them that seriously.

KMD: And what was your group of friends like?

MP: Mix. White girls, I had a black friend, Chicana friends, Portuguese. There’s another little population that was at St. Patrick’s and that was Portuguese—Portuguese American.

KMD: Now, I’m curious. You identify these folks that are Irish, Italian, and Portuguese, that they—it was clear that that’s what they were. They announced [it, if] this comes up, or—

MP: Yes. They’ll talk about it just casually. Is that because of the Catholic school, [it] makes you do that somehow, some way? I guess. Because I remember my friend Judy was Portuguese. She would [say], “Porte-gee,” making fun of that. And she was the one that would bring that up. Yeah, they would talk about their nationalities very casually, not to throw it in my face or anybody’s face. It was just, “Oh, yeah, this weekend we had to go to my Portuguese grandma’s birthday, and we had this special bread.” And I guess that was part of the private school philosophy/mentality, [to] talk about where you come from.

- KMD:** Well, it would make sense with the Catholic school, the Catholic Church being supportive of immigrants and their culture.
- MP:** Yes. That's why. There you go.
- KMD:** And so these other kids that aren't in the private school, that I guess your family was trying to avoid. What's that atmosphere like in your neighborhood?
- MP:** It's—it feels intense. Driving around my neighborhood, seeing students my age just kind of hanging out, looking a bit menacing. And I guess we were referring to them as *cholos* and *cholas*. But I don't even know—I don't even think they referred to themselves as that. It was just—they were different now to us. And—
- KMD:** And they're dangerous, in gangs, or that's what's imagined?
- MP:** I guess that's what's imagined. But then you do hear “Didn't you hear the gunshots last night?” “Oh, is that what that was?” “Yeah, so-and-so got shot.” I don't know if—we never saw anybody get shot. What's also happening at this time, as we're living in the storybook homes, all living on Cinderella Lane, there's a lot of break-ins, there's a lot of burglaries.
- KMD:** What does your family do to protect against that?
- MP:** Just my mom's always home, and we have our little Chihuahuas who are barking. And I believe one time, this guy jumped over our backyard, into our backyard, and he was all bloody if I'm not mistaken. And he kind of was spaced out, and then he jumped over the fence and ran away. So that was there. “Oh, yeah, somebody got broken into.” And then one time, my brother got his—he got a new Camaro, and somebody stole his car seats.
- KMD:** Jeez.
- MP:** And the funny thing was that my dad got a box, and he drove the car on a box to the insurance guy. I think that's a story. Yeah. [laughter] But so, yeah, burglaries are happening, that's definitely the neighborhood.
- KMD:** Your family didn't put bars on the windows or a fence?
- MP:** No, I don't think so. I don't think so. But just being very aware, and then at one point, these Hells Angels moved next door.
- KMD:** Literally.
- MP:** Yes. And I think my mom kind of liked that, because she felt safe.
- KMD:** Because no one's going to mess with them? [laughter]
- MP:** Yeah, I guess. I guess. [laughter] And they would line up with their bikes and make the most noise and take off.
- KMD:** What did you think of the bikes?
- MP:** They were hot. That was cool. That made—yeah, I liked that. I liked looking at that.
- KMD:** So you're growing up in a time when this kind of *movimiento* stuff is just getting off the ground. Is you or your family aware of that, or your sisters or brothers involved in—
- MP:** My family is aware of that, and I'm aware of that. But it's not—but nobody's telling me that it's important. I think I see it from afar, and I think I hear other stories, that it is important. But my sister at this time is going to San Jose State, so she's in it, she's in there. But she's not coming home going, “Viva la huelga, la causa!” She's not doing that.
- KMD:** Is your family eating grapes and lettuce?
- MP:** I think we're boycotting.
- KMD:** Because we had no lettuce or grapes in the house as a child. Just, I had a distinct memory of that.
- MP:** I think we have to be, because my dad did do some work with César Chávez.
- KMD:** He did?
- MP:** Yeah, in my earlier—when I'm an infant to, I'd say, about five or so—my dad is going around to various prisons with this Father, Father McDonald, and they're—César Chávez is accompanying them, and they're giving Mass to prisoners.
- KMD:** Wow.

MP: Yeah. So my parents are aware, but there's no lecturing to us. There's no, "You have to do this."

KMD: But they're not taking you to any events or demonstrations.

MP: No. But I'm seeing it. I drive by a grocery store, and I see the picket signs. So I'm seeing it and I'm hearing it. I watched the news a lot. My dad likes to watch the news, so that's on, and I'm such a TV consumer, I'm seeing it. I see César Chávez. He's Chicano, he's Mexicano like me. There's that connection—

KMD: There's a recognition.

MP: Recognition, there you go. Yes.

KMD: So when you were growing up, it sounds like more of a Latino-based community, but you have exposure to other kinds of folks?

MP: Yes.

KMD: Did you ever have any sense of like, I don't know, that there was—there might be conflict between folks who [are] white, brown, black—?

MP: Well, I do see conflict between folks in my public school.

KMD: Is that brown and black?

MP: It's brown, black, and white. I do see—I can see this day, a white kid, he hurts a black girl somehow, some way. I'm not sure if it was on purpose. Then I see a mob of black kids chase that white boy. "Get that white boy. Beat his ass to the ground." And then you see teachers and principals trying to stop it. It's crazy. And then I do see black and brown violence, I see that.

KMD: Now, you've worked a lot in the public schools.

MP: Yes, as a playwriting teacher. And that started in the late '90s with an agency called ASK Theatre Projects. And we would take up a residency—I guess two, two and a half, almost three months—once a week, we'd come in, and we'd get two classes that would be back-to-back. And it was mostly English classes, and we'd get the students to write a short play, a five-minute play, ten-minute play. Each student. And that was hard. When I first did that job, that scared me. That was really hard. This is '98, which is not too long ago, and I went to Hamilton High School. Hamilton High School is mostly black and Latino kids. And I walked into this classroom, and I—these kids were the last-chance kids. If they didn't get their shit together at this particular class, they were going to ship them to—who knows [where].

So I walk into that class, and the kids are—they look like they're high. They don't want to be there. They're yelling. I felt like Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*, that movie. The erasers are being thrown, shoes. I thought, "What am I doing here?" I needed the job, right—artists taking the job that best suits them. So that was hard. That was hard to turn things around. But what I came to the conclusion was—these kids needed focused attention. Nobody was giving them the time of day. Nobody was telling them that they had—that there was hope in their little lives. So that's—when I figured that out, things changed.

KMD: Do you think you're any good at that?

MP: I'm sorry, what was the question?

KMD: Do you think you're any good at getting these kids to feel like—

MP: I think now I am. Now, I am.

KMD: What are some of the tricks that you use?

MP: Food. [laughter] Food was a good thing. Just bring in whatever, I don't know, muffins. "What's that muffin like? What's it taste like? When's the last time you had a muffin?" "Never had a muffin." "Why?" "We don't buy [them]." "Why not?" Muffins are important." It was just getting them to talk, as opposed to—because originally, it was like, "I don't know." Their response to everything was, "I don't know. I'm not funny. I can't write." Everything was, "No, no, can't, can't," negative, negative, negative. So then that was—the food thing—just asking them questions. "When's the last time you've been in a body of water?" "I've never been to the ocean." "You've never been to the ocean? You're fifteen minutes away. I can't believe that. Why?" So it was just engaging, asking them questions.

And then the other thing—and then finally, "Okay, you guys have to write a ten-minute play." "A ten-minute play!" They had never been to a play. Why should they do that? It's ridiculous. I go, "Because it's

a story about you. Your life's important." "My life's not important. I don't know what to write about." I go, "When's the last time you got in trouble with your mom?" "Two nights ago." "What happened?" "I didn't come home in time." "Well, that's what you're going to write about. The guy who didn't come home on time, and then he had to face consequences, right?" "Yeah." "Well, what happened?" So what was happening. It was amazing—I was getting these kids who didn't even turn in homework assignments—I was getting them to write plays. So when I heard that, I thought, "Okay. All right. It's worth it."

KMD: Yeah, did you ever see yourself doing public school teaching?

MP: For little quick moments. But to come in every day, those type of kids—not those type of kids—just high school kids, every day—too much work. Because then I would see those everyday teachers that were there every day—a lot of them didn't look too happy. A lot of them looked really burnt out. So the once a week—what can I do? I can come in once a week as a playwright? Okay, I can do that. We got paid pretty good for what we did once a week. And then one of the cool parts about this program was, midway, we would have professional actors come in and they would read rough drafts.

KMD: Wow.

MP: So you had these kids who'd never gone to a play, never been told positive things—they get their work read by professional actors. "You wrote that?" And you could tell they're all getting all puffed up. "Yeah, I did."

KMD: Did you have anybody like that for you in school?

MP: I had really good—I had some good teachers who pumped me up, who discovered that I was a good writer. And they would encourage me to write more, and encourage me to go on to college. Encourage me. So definitely, yeah.

KMD: So when college gets mentioned, it starts to become a normal thing?

MP: It gets mentioned, and I guess I take—I think, "Oh, yeah, okay. College." But my upbringing, nobody's really talking about college just 'cause my parents—that's not their lives. They barely—my mom, [has a] fourth grade education, and then her family said, "We need your help." Or she was told, "You don't need to go to school."

KMD: So she must have taught herself to read and write.

MP: Yes.

KMD: I mean, you can get a lot from fourth grade, but not—

MP: Yes, yes. Both of my parents did a lot of reading. And my father kept journals. *He* kept a journal.

KMD: *He* kept a journal. [laughter]

MP: Yes. Yes. Yeah, my father read a lot, a lot, a lot.

KMD: So you're getting some encouragement from school teachers that you have a talent in writing and maybe you should go on to college. When does that become, like—

MP: A reality?

KMD: Yeah.

MP: Probably. And also, too, when I'm in high school, I'm hanging out with girls, the rich, alcoholic, drug girls. They come from a background of college, so they're talking about—[despite] the drugs, they're talking about, "I have to go to college."

KMD: Are they—I'm curious, are they doing drugs—this is when they're partying, they're not getting high before school, and—

MP: Um, yes. And I'm part of that crowd, too. We had a locker full of liquor—the liquor locker.

KMD: How did you manage that?

MP: It was easy. This is when the school wasn't doing that well, so they need everybody's tuition. In the olden days, they would kick you out in two seconds. But now, money's—you know, this is the '70s. This is Nixon era, the '70s. Everybody's losing money. So there's countless times where we would be—not disgustingly drunk, but kind of smashed.

KMD: A little high.

- MP: Yeah, we'd put vodka in the Hawaiian Punch, and the Sister would come over and she'd go, "So, are you girls having a good time?" "Yes, Sister. Yes, Sister Veronica." And she must have smelled it, I mean, jeez. Or walking into one of my classes—I remember walking into one of my art classes—which I adored—taking art classes. And the teacher there wasn't a nun. She goes, "You guys are drunk. I can smell it." And then actually saying, to her face, "No, we're not." [laughter] "No, we're not." "I should report you guys." "Go ahead."
- KMD: So there was no consequences in this Catholic school?
- MP: There—I guess there were. I guess some of the girls, some of the rowdier girls—maybe the ones who knocked over a statue, I don't know. Just a quick little note: When my sister Eleanor was going to Notre Dame, her and her hooligan friends, they threw eggs at the school, and she got in trouble for that. [laughter]
- KMD: You mean like people used to paper a house or—
- MP: TP, yes.
- KMD: TP and doing the eggs, and they got caught.
- MP: Yes, she got caught. And I forget what happened to her, but they got busted. So we didn't do that. We didn't deface the school. We just—in our little group, we got drunk a lot. [laughter]
- KMD: And you made it through school.
- MP: Yeah.
- KMD: So in the story I read the other night, the quinceañera one, that—is it true that your sister would cover for you—take you places, and pick you up later? They're supposed to chaperone, but they're not.
- MP: Yes, that happened a few times, I think. Yeah. I mean, that's kind of standard, what happens when you have—
- KMD: I guess when you have a few siblings, [they've] got a car.
- MP: Yeah. But my mom not wanting me to even go to the quinceañera, because she knew damn well—
- KMD: What would happen.
- MP: What would, what could happen.
- KMD: So you really did grow up with quinceañeras. Your friends are having quinceañeras.
- MP: Yes. And that one I was almost in, and I knew that I couldn't do it. Just didn't—me in that Little Bo Peep dress, and—
- KMD: Is it partly the girlie-girl thing, or is it . . .
- MP: The girlie-girl thing, and just that whole ritual—it just didn't make sense to me.
- KMD: What it represented.
- MP: Yeah. Did not make sense to me.
- KMD: Well, you're certainly not getting that kind of "Girls are supposed to do x, y, and z" from your family, it doesn't sound like.
- MP: Right, right. I think that's just me coming into my queer self and not knowing it, not knowing how to talk about it.
- KMD: What about the—so the quinceañera that you're seeing, this is considered "Oh, it's just what Mexicans do," or, "Those Mexicans do it."
- MP: I guess so. I guess that's my prejudice, going, "Yeah, those Mexicans. I'm not—I don't do that."
- KMD: Is your family—I mean, there's a lot of girls in your family, so—having one quinceañera, that means you have to have—
- MP: See, and my parents come— I was asking my mom about—asking her about the whole quinceañera thing, and her words were—it was ridiculous to her. It didn't make any sense to her. "Why spend that much money? Just wait for the wedding," if there was going to be a wedding. "What's the point?" So I don't know, I don't know if she had a bad experience with quinceañeras when she was growing up.
- KMD: Well, were you seeing girls getting pregnant after fifteen?

MP: Yes. Yes, that was my era. fifteen-year-old, sixteen-year-old. My mom having friends whose daughters at sixteen got pregnant. So teenage pregnancy was prevalent and scary. So I guess that's what that—that trigger. She's a woman now. So.

KMD: I'm curious, did your family . . . So quinceañera was just one of those large cultural markets. Music is another. What about food?

MP: Food. My mom, [a] great cook, always would—she would make great Mexican food. My brother and I as children, we—our diet is hamburger, hot dogs, pizza, but specifically McDonald's hamburgers. And I think that's pop culture. My brother and I are just seeped in that. We would see things on the television. I don't know if you guys ever got this, with the slice of pizza. There was a certain slice, and you could put it in the toaster? [*laughter*] That's not a good way to have a slice of pizza. It doesn't make any sense. Who—"Mom, please get us that. We must have that." And then Tang, we grew up on Tang. And there was another—oh, the space food. Remember that space stick [Space Food Sticks]? Had to have that.

KMD: Was it a drag to have beans and rice and tacos or enchiladas or whatever?

MP: No. It's delicious, because my mom makes it. It's delicious. But then she'll make her version of spaghetti, which is just—get the spaghetti noodles in a pan, in a saucepan, throw in some sauce from a can, maybe she doctors it up. This is when we were growing up, really quick—Parmesan cheese from the can, garlic bread—[we] loved that. But then when my sisters are late teens and early adult, they start—I think they either go to cooking classes or they just become more savvy in the cooking world, and they start making gourmet stuff. They'd make a spaghetti sauce all day long. So my mom starts doing that.

KMD: So from scratch, and—

MP: So from *rasquache* spaghetti sauce, which was delicious to us, that would take my mom five minutes—it's all day. It becomes all day. So my sisters—my older sisters' influence is a big deal, food-wise, for us.

KMD: So this kind of popular culture, things that you're—TV is obviously part of that. What do you watch on television?

MP: At what age?

KMD: We didn't talk about this on tape, did we?

MP: I can't remember.

KMD: Neither can I. I'm pretty sure we hadn't done this.

MP: I think we—

KMD: That was the lost—

MP: The lost tape. [*laughter*] As a child?

KMD: Growing up, yeah.

MP: As a child, I am watching all the cartoons. Favorites—*Flintstones*, what else? *Space Ghost*. *Johnny Quest*. Oh yes, *Johnny Quest*. I think that a true—my true lesbian identity was, I was *Johnny Quest*.

KMD: *Johnny Quest*. [*laughter*]

MP: Well, he looked like a lesbian, don't you think?

KMD: Yeah. [*laughter*]

MP: Short hair, that little jungle outfit—that's so lesbian. [*laughter*] He had that Indian friend, Haji. Hot. Another lesbian. And then [his] dog, Bandit. I mean, gosh, you can't get any more lesbian than that. Things like *Leave It To Beaver*, *The Munsters*. What else was happening—oh, *Batman*. Not the cartoon, but—

KMD: Yeah. *Bam!*

MP: *Bam!* That was a big deal because my brother and I would pretend to be Batman, and [we] would do the various movements and the kicks. We were always pretend fighting, and making all these crazy sound effects. I would throw my brother into the wall, but I didn't do that. He would make these loud noises. My mom would come out, "You kids! Stop it!" "We're just kidding, Mom! It's pretending!" *Bam!* Throw him against the wall. He would make more noise than need be. And then also, wrestling was a big deal for us.

KMD: WWF? [*laughter*]

- MP: No. No, no. It wasn't called that. It was just wrestling, on Friday nights. You had people like Haystack Calhoun, and some other cool names, and they would do that exaggerated wrestling. It's not compared—nothing to what it is now, just really—
- KMD: Closer to the sport, but with character.
- MP: Yes. So there I go, again, we'd go to pretend fighting and wrestling. I remember throwing each other across the room and stuff. So that's a big deal. But I'm also watching the—people performing on television, all the comics: Richard Pryor, Flip Wilson—who else?—Robert Kline, Phyllis Diller, Dom DeLuise, Jonathan—what's it, Jonathan, what's his name? Dom DeLuise and Jonathan—
- KMD: You just made my mind blank [*inaudible*].
- MP: [I] can see his face perfectly. [Jonathan Winters.] It's mostly men who gets airtime, so I'm seeing these guys onstage, storytelling. Not so much joke after joke after joke. They're storytelling. And that's—
- KMD: Like what I know of Bill Cosby.
- MP: Yes. Bill Cosby. And that storytelling concept is making a lot of sense to me as I could, I'm like, "Oh." *The Ed Sullivan Show*.
- KMD: So you're able to figure out how they develop story. Is that what you're saying? Like plot, character—
- MP: Yeah, I like that they're on—and they're just talking freely, but there's a story that they're telling. I could sit there and watch that forever. And knowing—when I see Phyllis Diller, she's doing joke after joke after joke. So I'm able to distinguish storytelling while she does just jokes like that. Rodney Dangerfield, Henny Youngman, Bob Hope. I'm seeing all these individuals, solo performers—it's making sense me.
- KMD: What about the sitcoms that [you] have like Lucy—Lucille Ball?
- MP: Oh, yes, watching that.
- KMD: Just physical comedy, and—
- MP: Yes. Yes, I'm watching that, because my family, we're watching that. *The Beverly Hillbillies*, oh my God, my father loved that. *Rasquache* white people. "Hey, we can relate to that." Yes, loved that. What else? *Partridge Family*, *Brady Bunch*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Bewitched*—loved *Bewitched*. Thought she was hot—couldn't really figure that out, but I was like, "She's pretty. I want her as my mom."
- KMD: Oh, is that how it's articulated at that time? "She's pretty?"
- MP: "She's pretty." But I just liked that she had that—she was a witch. I thought, "I wish I could do that." And then movies that are coming out, *Sinbad* and all that stuff. Watching statues come to life? Whew, turn on. Major, major turn on. [*laughter*] I have this thing for the Statue of Liberty. I have a crush on the Statue of Liberty. So mythology—that is turning the hell on, is turning me on to—
- KMD: And what is the—because it's fantasy, because . . .
- MP: I guess. I guess it's fantasy. Yeah. It's just—it's great. *Abbott and Costello*, *The Three Stooges*. Oh, my God, *The Three Stooges* are a big deal. My older brother likes it.
- KMD: Well, the physical comedy makes sense to what I see you do.
- MP: Red Skelton.
- KMD: Yeah.
- MP: Red Skelton. He's a big influence, oh my God. Okay, got it. Silliness. Yeah, all that stuff. But *The Three Stooges*—and usually, when women talk about the Three Stooges, it's all negative. "I hate the Three Stooges!" I liked them. The sound effects that they would make—my family would do that. My family would do *The Three Stooges* sound effects.
- KMD: What do you mean? While watching?
- MP: Just—yeah, while either watching, they do all this physical stuff, but they're also going like, "Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk-nyuk." The Three Stooges. And I'll do it, and they go, "Oh, the Three Stooges."
- KMD: So your home life is incredibly rich inspiration, artistically.
- MP: Yes.
- KMD: Anything outside of the home that was that inspiring, or any—somewhat inspiring? Maybe in school, or friends—

- MP: I guess school. I guess school, or—yeah, it had to have been school. It’s a small school, but—
- KMD: So it’s a small school, but did they have, like, drama classes, and—
- MP: Because even in my private school days, despite knowing that things were getting really chaotic and tumultuous and what have you, I was always in the top rank, wanting to do good: learning my timetables, being up against this Asian kid. We were like neck and neck, we would play these games, and I think I won—I think I won, by a hair. “I beat you! I’m the top!” Getting new information about whatever. And then any time we had art projects, I was there. We’re going to work with construction paper, cut things up—the sound of scissors cutting paper turned me on. The smell of crayons. When people would come to us, and they would share—I guess like animals.
- KMD: Did you draw in your spare time, when you’re not doing homework and you’ve really got nothing to do, you—
- MP: Yeah, I would doodle. I think my brother and I kind of were neck and neck drawing.
- KMD: Why do you say that? Was he also known for that in the family?
- MP: Yeah, sketching, pencil work. And I remember one time in the sixth grade, when I was already in St. Patrick’s, I did this underwater—it was—I got it from one of those—not *Highlights*. What are those magazines for kids? Highlight?
- KMD: Yeah, Highlight. Something like that. [The magazine is titled *Highlights*—ed.]
- MP: It wasn’t that, it was something like that. And I just completely sketched this underwater sea life, and there was this [bathyscaphe]. I remember I was in a bathyscaphe rampage. I was drawing those all over the place. And it was great. It was fish and kelp and all these really cool things, and I guess we had to put it up on the board, and a lot of people didn’t think it was me. And what I got was, “Oh, we thought some boy did that.” Isn’t that interesting? “Some boy did that.” I go, “No. I did that. No boy.”
- KMD: So you were developing a sense of—boys have certain expectations, girls have others?
- MP: Yeah. I remember that—yeah. Now I’m really thinking about that, because I really did a super-good job on it, and I remember the comments were like, “Oh, you did that? I thought some boy did that.” A boy did that? Why would—just ‘cause it’s good. Girls can’t—and I’m thinking, “Wait, girls can’t draw this? Or girls don’t draw?”
- KMD: The content? Girls don’t draw this, or girls don’t draw as well as boys?
- MP: Right, both.
- KMD: Did you fight against those kinds of expectations growing up? Did you consciously go, “I’m going to do a certain sport because it’s not considered girlie?”
- MP: Maybe. Did I do that? Gosh, I don’t know if that was—subconsciously, maybe?
- KMD: No, I’m only going after the conscious. If you’re not aware of it, no. Bad question. I just know that I—
- MP: Probably—
- KMD: People said girls shouldn’t be loud, so I was loud.
- MP: Did I do that? I think I could have done that. I mean, I just know when it was time to sign up for sports, which was in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, I’m going, “Oh, yeah. I’m signing up.” I’m not thinking about—yeah, I’m going to say subconsciously, I probably did that, because it’s just—
- KMD: Did you play ball with your brother and your dad?
- MP: Yes.
- KMD: Oh, you did.
- MP: And football, because football is the big rage.
- KMD: And you go to the park or just in the yard?
- MP: In the yard.
- KMD: Throwing balls.
- MP: Yeah, football. My brother and I did a lot of—I was the quarterback. This is when the Vikings—this is when football was a sport, as opposed to now, it’s just big, commercial, huge, moneymaking—yeah. Football

was a big deal for us. We were playing football, played football. Yeah, I was—it made sense to be athletic. I guess my father encouraged that because he was also very physical.

KMD: Oh, really?

MP: And we'd go to a park, and he'd be up in a tree. "Honey!" And my mom would be, "Oh, my God, you're going to fall!"

KMD: Were these big family gatherings or just hanging out at the park sometimes?

MP: Yeah, hanging out at the park. Yeah, but we had a front yard and backyard too, so there was a lot of space.

KMD: Did your mom and dad keep a garden or anything, or it was just grass?

MP: There was a garden, yeah, a rose garden.

KMD: Something she was proud of or was known for?

MP: I think that was my dad's thing, his rose garden. Yeah. No, they had a well-kept yard, because they did it. There was no hiring of—

KMD: Well, I don't think anybody did, did they? At that time, in those days?

MP: Hiring people? Could have. But no, it was them. And I remember sitting there pulling the weeds. That was one thing my mom did a lot, pull the weeds. She had various garden gloves.

KMD: Did you mow?

MP: I think I attempted to mow. It was always a drag. "I don't want to mow the lawn, please." And we didn't have the little motored one, it was just—

KMD: No. Pushed it.

MP: Yeah. And then raking it—cutting the grass and then raking it.

KMD: So it doesn't sound like there was boys' jobs, girls' jobs—girls do this, boys do that—or any kind of restriction in your family growing up.

MP: No, I guess, no. My brother and I had to go pick up the dog shit in the back, yeah. Girls can do that too. But I do remember when—my little happy-go-lucky fun life—when it was time to do chores, I'm maybe eight-ish, nine-ish—Mom goes, "Okay, this is what's going to happen every Saturday—you're going to clean the bathroom." "What the—what? I can't just sit around, drink chocolate milk and watch *The Three Stooges*?"

KMD: So it was at age eight, you distinctly remember this.

MP: Eight, nine-ish. She goes, "Yeah, you're going to make your bed. You're going to make your bed every day." This is how you do it—this is how you make a bed. The seam of the sheet goes like this, and you go . . ." So she made it fun. [*sound effects*]

KMD: So chores on Saturday, church on Sunday.

MP: Chores, yeah. Cleaning the house on Saturday, yes.

KMD: That's a good thought to end on. Want to take a break for lunch?

MP: Sure.

[*break in audio*]

KMD: This is Karen Mary Davalos and Monica Palacios. We took a break for lunch. It's still August 14. It's about two o'clock now. And I wanted to just do a little bit more about your growing up, your childhood, before going off to college. We talked about that. But I had some questions about the family's spirituality. I mean, your very clear descriptions about going to church, regular churchgoing. But I'm wondering if you had a sense of—you know, did you pray? Did the family have a crucifix, an altar in the home?

MP: Yes. Yes, there was a crucifix that my mom still has. And it's kind of a cool thing because I've been always intrigued with design—boxes, little boxes that you can open, [that] have secret compartments. I guess that's my espionage, gadgetry era, all that little stuff. And we had this crucifix that—I don't know, let's say it's about eight and a half by eleven that fit in there, and where the Jesus layer [was], it slid open. Is that hot or what? It slid open to put—I don't know, candles or rosaries. I'm trying to figure out why—Dad's flask, joints—I don't know. It was just this little hidden thing, and I was intrigued with that.

KMD: But there was nothing in it.

- MP: No. Not ever. When I did it, there was nothing in it. So that existed on the wall, and maybe another couple of other small crucifixes, just wooden—nothing garish, nothing—no blood, no suffering,—so that was there. And we would pray the rosary, there was some rosary praying moments. I remember doing that when I was little, four—
- KMD: Someone passed away, or—
- MP: No, my parents—my mom would just say, “Let’s pray the rosary.” And again, it wasn’t done like, “Let’s pray the rosary because we are sinners.” It was poetic, it was performative.
- KMD: Did you enjoy the rhythm?
- MP: Yeah. Yes.
- KMD: So you had this Catholic upbringing, and you eventually—
- MP: How do I not participate anymore?
- KMD: Yeah.
- MP: I think, eventually, just coming out as a lesbian, and just being more aware of what the Catholic church was saying, and being not in agreement with their philosophies. And that’s when I just completely, “Mmm, no. I’m done. I can’t support this.”
- KMD: And was there a clear—is it just like a general sense, or was there like—do you remember during a Mass, or reading somewhere, or—
- MP: Seeing—what do they call those dudes?—deacons, monsignor—all those bigwig—the men telling the world that homosexuality was a sin. Stuff like that.
- KMD: Oh, okay. So you did have preaching at the pulpit about it.
- MP: But this is not at my church; this is on the news. I’m seeing this a lot in the late ’70s, early ’80s. AIDS is coming out. So as AIDS is coming out, you’re seeing more religious freaks. You’re seeing the extreme right making fools of themselves. And I’m thinking, “Oh, no, no, no. I am not a part of this.”
- KMD: Did it sound like the church you knew?
- MP: No.
- KMD: Why would you say that?
- MP: Well, because the church that I grew up with was celebratory. It didn’t talk negatively about anybody. So now they’re zeroing in and being specific.
- KMD: Did the rest of your family remain either spiritual or Catholic?
- MP: Yes. My eldest sister Clara, and her husband, Mel, got involved with Marriage Encounter—do you know what that is?
- KMD: Yeah.
- MP: It’s the Catholic—
- KMD: Retreats for how to be a good married couple?
- MP: But Catholic.
- KMD: Yeah, Catholic.
- MP: They got involved with that. And they looked like they were enjoying it. And they looked—and then I would meet the people that they mentored, and they seemed like they learned a lot from them. I don’t know how they did it. I don’t know the process, the curriculum. I don’t know what—
- KMD: Yeah, it’s very specific—
- MP: They go, “Oh, okay.” “How did you guys—how do you know my sister?” “Oh, through Marriage Encounter.” So they were doing that. My other elder sister, Marty . . . Eleanor was a lesbian. She felt the same way as me, so we didn’t—we bonded even more. And then—let’s see, who has the kids? My brother Art, my sister Marty. They baptized their kids. But being baptized was more of a ritual that was interesting, was intriguing. So I could understand why they did it even if they weren’t super into—involved with the Catholic—
- KMD: The church.
- MP: Yeah, beliefs, and the church beliefs. And plus, you get a party out of it and gifts.

KMD: [laughter] Well, part of my question is—I was trying to get a sense of if you had, from this Catholic upbringing, Catholic schooling—

MP: Don't want to be a nun?

KMD: No. [laughter] A sense of spirituality from that?

MP: I guess so. Because I didn't pinpoint that there was *the* God, it was always some gods. Something larger than life—bigger than me—that existed. And I would think that is a derivative of being brought up Catholic. That makes sense. And then connecting with Dyan [Garza], a partner of mine—she was very spiritual, and so hearing her talk and her beliefs, I [thought], “Oh, okay. I'm understanding this.” Her philosophy is that there's some type of spirit—she didn't say “God,” she said that there is some type of spirit that exists that has helped her and has guided her. “Oh, all right. I can see that.” So listening to her talk about what she believed in, and then she had an aunt who was involved with Judaism, I think? So just hearing other people's stories about spirituality.

KMD: So these are more other people's stories, not your own sense of spirituality now? I mean, it sounds like you have an idea of a greater being.

MP: Yeah. A greater being, yes. Gods and goddesses. That's what I think about. I think about gods and goddesses.

KMD: Do you ever crave any of that ritual?

MP: Crave?

KMD: Ah, that might be too strong a word for you, but—

MP: You know what? Every now and then, I do think about the church of my past, of my childhood. And I walk into a church, and I don't feel that energy, and I walk right out. I go there and I admire the architecture—I love [the] architecture of churches. I think they're really outstanding. I go in there and I see statues that are bloody, that are supposed to be bloody. “Oh, no. It's not me.” Or some really beautiful stained glass. “Hey, that's great.” And then the suffering. I go, “Why is everybody suffering? Why—I don't get it.”

KMD: So no strict nuns, fire and brimstone, hell and damnation?

MP: There was—not in my elementary school. These are when Vatican II [started]—so everybody's trying to be the hippest nun or priest or brother. So when I get into Notre Dame High School, we have some older nuns who were there when my sister was there, so now they're ancient. First of all—please don't write in, ladies and gentlemen—they look scary. They're old. They look scary. But in fact, they're not. There was this one teacher who was our math teacher—I think Sister Angela—sorry, Sister Angela. Hope you're in a better place. She was just mean and bitter, so—she was the math teacher, so I didn't do very good in math because I didn't want to hang out with her. I didn't want to give her the time of day. Why was she bitter? Is it because she—I understand that nuns didn't get a pension like priests, and I think that's still true. I don't know if that's the deal, but she probably had a lot of things to be bitter about. She didn't get paid. But just—I didn't know what was going on in her life. But the fact is, she had this certain type of energy.

So there were those nuns in this high school that were like that. But compared to the horror stories of other friends and their experiences with Catholic school. “Oh, yeah, I saw a nun pick up a little boy by his collar 'cause he spoke back to her.” “I saw a priest kick the shit out of this guy.” I didn't see that. There were the drunks, definitely—the priests who drank—who would come in. Father Flanigan—there was always a Father Flanigan somewhere, right? He'd always come in with alcohol breath. “Good morning, boys and girls.” And we had to stand up and say, “Good morning, Father Flanigan.” You could tell, eh, “You've been out all night. You've been cATTin' around.” We saw that. But—so yes, I guess I did walk away with a sense of spirituality from my upbringing.

KMD: And in terms of your creative work, I don't remember any—this doesn't surface in your creative [work]?

MP: Religious stuff?

KMD: Yeah.

MP: No. I think I might say “the Virgin Mary” in a couple of poems, but I think the line is, “The Virgin Mary, whether she was a consumer or a lesbian.”

KMD: Right.

MP: And the other day, I did receive an email from this gentleman who wanted to—he’s doing his PhD work about lesbians—Latina lesbians and their connection to the Virgin Mary—assuming that was my story as well, and wanted to know why I was connected to the Virgin Mary. And I thought, “I should forward this to Karen Mary, she’s the Guadalupe expert.”

KMD: Yeah. [laughter]

MP: So that was interesting to me. I guess he found this on the Internet, and then just e-mailed me. It’s this big, long e-mail, under the assumption that I had this spiritual, deep connection, because I’m a Latina lesbian too, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Yeah, no, I had more of a connection to Jesus. The sandals—I think it was the look, the masculine look, I think. [laughter]

KMD: Did you—you must have grown up listening to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, so even more so the hippie look.

MP: Yes. *Jesus Christ Superstar* was a big, interesting turning point for me. This was in the sixth grade, same year that we become these crazy, rowdy-ass kids. And as I said, the nuns and the priests are bringing in material that are exuding hipness, and *Jesus Christ Superstar* was one of those things that they made us listen to a lot. But listening to *Jesus Christ Superstar* made sense to me, how—the musical, and how they were telling a story, but everything was through singing. And to this day, I still think about that. That did influence me. I didn’t really know it at the time.

KMD: Was that like your first musical that you’d ever—had you been to see musicals?

MP: No, no. My first—I would say my first connection with a musical would be *The Sound of Music*, because I remember very clearly, it was my seventh birthday or my sixth birthday. I got this very specific little outfit, and the family of four went to the movies to go see *The Sound of Music*, because I shared that in class the following day. I was very excited about that.

KMD: Who did you identify with?

MP: Let’s see. I think I was lusting after Julie Andrews. I didn’t know it at the time.

KMD: You didn’t know it at the time. That was a good answer. [laughter]

MP: I just thought, “She’s hot. I don’t even know what hot means, Mom.” But yeah, I liked it, and I also liked the fact that it was a big family. I could relate to that. So that, and then prior to that, what would it be? I just knew—for now, I’m growing up, and so I just know that—not in my state, not in my city, but in New York, there’s musicals happening over there. *Hair*, *Old Calcutta*—wasn’t that one of them?

KMD: Uh-huh.

MP: Just all these—and I’m thinking, “God, how do I get over? I just want to see them.” I just know that they exist, and I’m intrigued, but I don’t know how to pursue that. I don’t know how to—

KMD: You listened to *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Did they show you the movie?—No, it comes out later.

MP: Yes, it comes out later. Did they show us the movie? No, it was the soundtrack.

KMD: Yeah, it’d be the soundtrack.

MP: It was the soundtrack. And then *Godspell*, and now high schools are performing—

KMD: Right, everybody does it, that and *Dreamcoat*, *Multicolored Dreamcoat*, whatever it’s called. [Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat—ed.]

MP: Right. So people are doing that, and I don’t have any desire to be in it. I just like the music. So yeah, I just know that musicals exist in New York City, on Broadway. I’m not really sure what that’s all about, but it’s there.

KMD: Now, I wanted to switch gears a bit, and ask you a few questions about—I mean, the connection for me is your growing up and then working with young children. I mean, from your resume, you’ve done elementary school, third graders.

MP: Yes. That was one of my favorite gigs. [laughter] She [Karen Mary Davalos] has a very confused look on her face: “You? Third graders?” [laughter]

KMD: [laughter] No, I can’t imagine working with third graders, anybody working with—

MP: I didn't think I was going to enjoy it, but of course I took the gig because, why?—I needed the money, as always. And it was, "Can you teach these third graders, over five weeks or six weeks, to write a screenplay?" "Yeah, sure. No problem." I had never done that before. Let me just say that I've taken many gigs where I've never done it before, and I just winged it, because, why?—

[break in audio]

KMD: We're on tape 3, side B, and Monica was talking about a gig she had working with third graders because she needed the money.

MP: That's right. I take this gig. This is a class that's after [school]. No, it's during the day, during part of their curriculum. And this is located in Paramount, the city of Paramount, which is central—central/east Los Angeles area? What is that? It's way the heck out there. It's Latino kids—mostly Latino kids—third graders, and I come to find out—before I take this gig, I'm doing middle school kids, kind of the same thing, teaching them autobiographical writing. And I meet a teacher there, with my sixth graders, and he tells me, "Oh, yeah, it's really easy to teach young kids how to write screenplays. Just use a video, one of their favorite videos like *Shrek*, and dissect that, and they'll know—everybody has seen *Shrek*, and they'll know how to relate to that, so just use that as your guide. See you later." Seriously, that's pretty much what happened. And then I went [about] ten minutes later, I'm faking it. So I have this knowledge about, use a movie that they've seen. So I go to my third grade class prepared, and I take one of my favorite Disney videos, *101 Dalmatians*. The old version, not the new one.

KMD: The old version, thank you.

MP: I take that, and—but first, I talk about *Shrek*. I said, "When you write a screenplay, you have a story, like *Shrek*, and there's a main character—he's the main character. And always the main character, he has a problem that he has to solve, right? And what's the problem with *Shrek*?" They all knew it: "He has to go get the princess from the tower, and . . ." Whatever the story is. "And along the way he encounters various things, various other problems, right? And what are those other problems?" "Oh, he . . ." They knew it.

KMD: They knew it.

MP: So you see that? [The] main character has a problem . . . I go, "Even in a regular storybook, like *Little Red Riding Hood*, what's her problem?" "The wolf!" They're getting it. So now, we watch—I go, "Now we're going to watch one of my favorite movies, *101 Dalmatians*." I play it about twenty minutes, stop it. "Who's the main character? What's the problem?" They know.

KMD: Wow.

MP: So I used that as our guideline. And then I tell them, "Okay, we're all going to do a group screenplay, and we're going to do ideas right now. We're just going to brainstorm, and then I'll go home and I'll write it. And then I'll bring it in tomorrow and we'll look over it. And the following week we're going to have actors come in, and we're going to act it out. Okay?" So that's what we did. So we watched *101 Dalmatians* and went over it, and then we started brainstorming. "Okay, we're going to have a story about—give me a name." "Bobby." "What's Bobby's problem?" That was third graders. They still respect you. They will do whatever you want them to do. They are super eager and enthusiastic. They love you.

KMD: Have you taught fourth grade? [laughter]

MP: No, I have not.

KMD: Fourth and fifth grade is when the—

MP: Middle school is the worst. Sixth, seventh, and eighth.

KMD: Yeah.

MP: No respect. I get no respect. So that was my third grade experience, and I would do that again in a second. It was—

KMD: Did you ever see yourself or your—the school your parents took you out of, the public school that [your] parents were going to protect you from—do you ever see that when you're doing these jobs? Does it remind you of the childhood you avoided or the childhood you had?

MP: No, it just makes me think of—just because I’ve been in the LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District] district so much, mainly for high school, and I see the disillusioned kids. I see the kids who don’t get that attention. I see the kids who you physically and—this is an example of me—there were so many students in this one classroom, this was my playwriting class, I couldn’t physically get to the back because there were too many desks and too much crap in the way.

KMD: Wow.

MP: So to me, that was a metaphor that this kid will never get the assistance she or he needs because they’re out of reach and nobody cares. That’s what I think about. And so when I go in there as an artist, I just always I do my best. But then when I encounter those students who tell me, they use the words of, “I don’t know. I don’t care. I don’t want to be here,”—they’re damaged. I can’t—I can’t do anything to help those kids. They’re goners. So when I get that little bit of hopefulness—“I think I might have changed her life”—that’s a big turn on.

KMD: Have you—I mean, obviously you’ve taught the little kids. Third grade sounds like the youngest?

MP: Yes.

KMD: And all the way to college.

MP: Yes. And now, in various colleges I’ve been—at Cal State LA where I had people who were older than me—that was interesting.

KMD: Having people older than you?

MP: Yes.

KMD: Do they respect you or is it . . .

MP: I went in there assuming that they were going to be—not appreciate that I was younger than them and what could I possibly be teach them? That’s me, self-sabotage. Thank you, self-sabotage. And it was quite the opposite. I—with my knowledge that I had and my skills, I was able to give them more information. So that was interesting.

KMD: You know, I have a small background in theater, very small. But I always thought of teaching as a performance. Do you get that?

MP: Oh, yeah.

KMD: So twice a week, once a week, or whatever you’re doing, three hours a day, five hours a day, whatever it is—does that wear you out the same way that a performance does, that you’re onstage?

MP: It depends where I teach. If I’m—if it’s my class, for example, if it’s a performance class, I create the rules. It’s my class. I’m totally using my skills, what I know how to do—usually it’s a fun thing for me. Yeah, I’m tired, but it’s fun. As opposed to when I’m teaching a core class, like I do at LMU—that’s harder, because I don’t want to rely on my clown-performer self, because then I won’t get that respect. The students will think, “Oh, she’s a big goofball.” Because it’s happened, I’ve done it. When I go in there and I lay down the laws, I get more respect, as opposed to going in there and being goofy right off the bat. They go, “Oh, she’s goofy. We can be goofy. Easy A.” So it just depends.

KMD: So I’m making another transition here. You talk about these classes, you needed the money. You took these jobs because you needed the money. What are the freebies, the commissions, the grants? Are those—

MP: Those—I take those with an honor. They’ve chosen me.

KMD: Do they come with enough money to actually live [on] as an artist?

MP: Well, the biggest one that I’ve gotten so far is the post-doc Rockefeller fellowship. That was a thirty-five thousand dollar stipend—ten months, a residency program. And you had to have a final product.

KMD: And you did.

MP: And I did, and the great thing about this particular one is, on top of that stipend, I was given a thirty thousand dollar theatrical production budget, which didn’t have to be. But the gentleman, the professor in charge of the Rockefeller at that moment, was Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, and the year that I got it, 2003–2004, was going to be the last year that the Center for Chicano Studies was going to receive this particular type

of grant. And he felt that I was the capstone, that he wanted me to have this so that I could do this production of this play.

KMD: I haven't done that kind of production, so I wouldn't know if thirty thousand dollars—is that a lot of money for a theater production, or is that a small budget for what you were engaging?

MP: It's a small [budget]. We did four shows with thirty thousand dollars, and I purposely left a balance because I didn't want to overspend, because I was making a business point that I'm going to come within budget. As a matter of fact, I'm not going to spend all that money. It was just enough. I mean, I could have spent a ton more money.

KMD: You didn't have to pay for the carpentry to make the set or anything, that was part of their in-house?

MP: That was the budget.

KMD: Oh, it was the budget. Okay.

MP: Yeah, that was the budget. I hired Dyan Garza. We sat down, I said, "This is my vision. This is my artistic vision. What can you do for eight thousand dollars?" We had rented the venue. I paid the actors—yeah, I could have paid them more, but everybody got paid. I think I did that well in that I've been self-producing all my life, so budgets, productions—it wasn't a new thing to me.

KMD: What about the commission [from] the Mark Taper Forum?

MP: That was through the Latino Theatre Initiative, which no longer exists. And I got [the fellowship]. It was small, I think a thousand, fifteen hundred dollars or something.

KMD: But you created a work out of it.

MP: Yeah. Yeah, the first one was my play *Clock*, and that was my first multi-character play. And a second one—had to do with about traveling on the bus in Los Angeles. It was specific—

KMD: I'd have to flip through and cheat, but I know you had two commissions.

MP: Yeah. The first one was *Clock*, in '96 or something.

KMD: And they're only about a thousand dollars, huh?

MP: Yeah, because at the time, it was Luis Alfaro and Diane Rodriguez. Well-respected actors, producers in Los Angeles. They wanted to give more out—they wanted to give money to more people, as opposed to—a lot of theaters would do, usually would do—they would get two people, and the two people would get ten thousand dollars each, or five thousand dollars each. Their philosophy was, "We want to make connections with more people, so it's going to be less money."

KMD: Was that like a month's worth of work, or . . .

MP: Well, I mean, it's—

KMD: Was there a timeline? I mean, obviously with the Rockefeller, there was a—

MP: Yeah. No, with them—no, I think it was over a couple of years. It just depends what type of agreement you make with the theater. Over the next six months, back and forth, back and forth, and then in a year, we want to see a production. In a year, we want to see a full draft. A lot of these theaters, they're small. They don't have many people working there, so it just depends. It depends what kind of grant it is.

KMD: Have you ever had trouble producing within the deadline?

MP: I've kind of come under the [*sound effects*]. Just like—yes.

KMD: I'm just trying to get a sense of your—like I talked to you before, like the space you work in, and how you create, and the creative process. And now I'm looking more at kind of the other side, like—

MP: The deadlines.

KMD: The deadline, and the production.

MP: I like fire under my ass.

KMD: You do.

MP: Yes. I like a gun to my head. I think my best work comes from the urgency, the deadlines.

KMD: And so now, when you're working on the screenplay, that's your own—

MP: That's my own personal deadline of August—what's, thirtieth or thirty-first? How many days are in August?

KMD: Thirty-one. You get one extra day.

- MP: Yes. One extra day. That's me, that's because after the thirty-first, I'm going to be just way too busy. And so if I can't get my shit together to crank this out, technically I'm done, 'cause I've just taken my play—
- KMD: Putting it into the other media.
- MP: Putting it into the screenplay format. But it's only a one-act as a play, and the screenplay is a three-act, so I need to—
- KMD: You are writing more.
- MP: I absolutely am writing more. So I have this false sense of completion right now, extremely false. But for me, I've just made this personal goal, and I am challenging my professionalism. If I can't get my shit together to complete it, then I shouldn't be doing this.
- KMD: You have some notes in front of you.
- MP: Yes.
- KMD: Is that for us? Is there something you wanted to talk about?
- MP: I was just wanted to talk about the singing and music influencing my career, and the people—I think we talked about it last time, the people who had inspired me greatly. So I just had a list.
- KMD: Do you want to go over the list again?
- MP: Sure. I would have to say that Dyan Garza has been a big influence in my work. At one time, we were partners.
- KMD: You talked about—that she was part of the artistic exhibition—the visual arts part of VIVA.
- MP: Yes, and she was on the board as well.
- KMD: So she would help you decide what artists to exhibit?
- MP: And [she influenced] me personally [and] my own personal career.
- KMD: Oh, okay. You're talking about in your career.
- MP: My career, yeah. I would read her a story or a performance piece. "What do you think?" "Doesn't sound like you." "Doesn't sound like me? I just wrote it. It's me." She [replies], "No, you would have more of this, less curse words" "Oh, yeah. You're right." Little things like that. And then just the work that she does, 'cause she, in my earlier days—and also of late, too—she did a lot of my set designs. Just based on knowing my personality and knowing my work. [She] really inspired me in that way. And then when we were first married, I mean, she worked. She punched the clock, and enabled me to really focus on my work.
- KMD: What did she do for a living?
- MP: Various things. She was a floral designer, and she was a big deal in the floral design industry in the late '80s, early '90s, in Los Angeles. A lot of signature stuff that people do now? She did it. A lot of stuff. Just really a modest woman.
- KMD: So she was the stable income for the two of you?
- MP: Yeah, and that really allowed me to focus.
- KMD: And those were the years that you were working with VIVA.
- MP: Yeah. Let's see, late '80s into '94.
- KMD: The other folks you talked about last time that influenced you were more like—people out there, people that we all would know, public figures. You didn't talk very much about people in your life outside of your father and your family.
- MP: Right. Another person would be Marivel Danielson, a [former partner, dear friend, and brilliant] scholar who is presently working [at] Arizona State University. She had seen me perform in 1999, and actually—I found this out later—that my performance changed her life [and her work].
- KMD: Wow.
- MP: That's what I said. "What? I was just trying to be funny." She had never seen a Latina lesbian onstage talking about herself. Never seen that. So when I hear that, I [say], "Really? You've never seen that?" And she changed. She changed her major, and she's presently pursuing [Latina] lesbian cultural productions. Doing

work on me, on Marga Gomez, Carmelita Tropicana, other Latina lesbian filmmakers. In 2002, I did a very special show called *Queer Soul*, and it was a twenty-year retrospective. And she really assisted me on that.

KMD: Like the evening, what worked—

MP: Just feedback, 'cause she'd already been delving into my work. So yeah, her feedback on my work is very integral. [Because of the Rockefeller Fellowship] I was able to hire her, because she came out to UC Santa Barbara to finish up her PhD studies. And I was able to hire her to be my assistant during my Rockefeller residency, and she did above and beyond—she was a producer for that whole production.

KMD: Oh, really?

MP: Yeah. She did everything, did all things.

KMD: Did she have prior experience in theater or not?

MP: Nope.

KMD: You trained as you went.

MP: Yeah. Just . . . Yeah. “Do what I do. Do it quicker.” I’m on a timeline. [laughter] Yeah, it was just immerse—I just immersed her in that whole craziness. But yeah, and I’m thinking about, in my film, doing the film version of *Sweet Peace*. How can I talk her into doing that again, being a producer? I mean, she just has an eye of my work. She really assisted me with that story, “The Dress Was Way Too Itchy,” for that particular anthology.

KMD: For *Fifteen Candles*.

MP: I was cranking it out, sending her my drafts. She too would say, “No, this is not you. You wouldn’t write it like this.” “Why not!” “No, that’s not what you do.” “I don’t?” “You do it this way.” So yeah, she’s just been—

KMD: Where are those impulses coming from, that other people identify as not you? Trying too hard, or—

MP: I don’t know. I think for her because she knows my work so well, she knows me so well. She knows my characters, and how they speak, and their voice, and my voice as an author. And then she’ll give me an example, and I go, “Oh, right. You’re right. I have to say you’re right.” And I go back to the drawing board, I fix it. So yeah, she’s a soul mate. Dyan Garza’s a soul mate. I [have] these people in my life. Patricia Varela, Mayumi Hokari . . . They’ve been extremely supportive of my work, coming to my shows, photographing me onstage, just being there. And especially 'cause my family is up in the Bay Area, and growing up really close to them, so now physically, I’m not close to them. So these women really have become a second family, and that is needed to continue [my work].

KMD: So you’re talking about that kind of emotional support, emotional—

MP: Yeah. Emotional and critical support. [My relationship with Marivel, our love for one another, was influential in moving my work forward.]

KMD: And then I guess you’re saying at one time, Dyan was [also]—

MP: A partner of mine.

KMD: [Providing] financial support.

MP: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

KMD: Any other private commissions? No, that’s not a private commission. I don’t know why I said that. But you know, like—people that produce your work, literally, in the sense that, “Here’s some money to get that show finished.”

MP: Kind of. My friend, Arturo Jimenez, has always been there for me when money was short and he would loan me some cash. As a matter of fact, I still owe him some money right now. But just the fact that he has, you know—he goes, “When you’re ready to pay me back, you can pay me back.” That—that’s nice. As opposed to, “You better pay me back or I’m going to take you to court.” So just really loving friends who have just been there, emotionally, physically, financially. Another great friend, Vivian Varela, who—she’s the person—she was my LA foundation, because I was in New York thinking that I was going to go to NYU, and that didn’t happen, so I had to get the hell out of New York. And Vivian was living in LA at the time, and I just called her up and said, “Hey, remember, I was supposed to—you said I should come to LA? Can I

come tomorrow?" And my sister, because she's the kind of person that she is, bought me a one-way ticket from New York to LA. And I landed in LA, and Vivian was the only person that I knew. She let me stay in her one-bedroom apartment, she was sharing a one-bedroom apartment. I didn't have a car, so she let me use her car. Because of her, I really got myself established. I got my grounding—landed—I was able to land. I think eventually I would have come to LA, but—

KMD: Now, I kind of missed this whole part of going to New York.

MP: Really?

KMD: Yeah.

MP: We didn't talk about that?

KMD: No. I don't think I remember anything—

MP: Should I start talking about that now, or—

KMD: Well, just make a note if you want to jump into that or I'll write it down. Okay. Go ahead with the folks that influenced you.

MP: Yeah, so these people—my Los Angeles connections have just been really paramount to me still living here, existing.

KMD: Getting shows and getting them done?

MP: Yeah. You know—I mean, I did the hard work. I hustled my ass after I got to LA I called the friends of the friends of the friends. I hustled, got my name and my picture in the paper, I did all that what. But they were there just going, "Hey, you can do it." "I can? I don't know if I can." "No, no. You can do it." Them in the audience. Sometimes I don't want to see my friends in the audience, because I get nervous. Sometimes that happens to me. But they're there. I know that they're there, that they've come to be supportive. And even though they've seen me five hundred million times and they know my material—

KMD: And they laugh still.

MP: They can perform it. They laugh still. It's just sweet.

KMD: Yeah. I'm struck by how performers know their audience so well, and can feel—like you talked about that last time, there was somebody in the front row, and you're just—

MP: Oh, yeah, that energy.

KMD: So your friends help sending this positive energy. So there's the negative energy and there's the positive energy. Is there anything else that affects the performance?

MP: Rain. [laughter] Rain's always a bad thing. I don't do very well in the sun. Actually, I mean, I've done my share of outdoor performances, and those are always hard. You're dealing with so much distraction and the elements. I remember this one, 'cause I—when I first got here, I didn't do any of the gay events, the gay parades. I didn't do—I was too wasted, I didn't have my shit together then to do it. But they used to have the West Hollywood Street Fair. Have you ever heard of that?

KMD: Mm-hmm.

MP: And I remember—I think I did it twice. And then the last time I did it, I remember the morning I woke up, and I felt—I had cramps, and I just did not feel it. I was dreading it, dreading to go out there. And you know, you're in the middle of a street, nobody really knows you. You're just a comic. And I remember thinking, "Oh, my God. Okay. I don't feel very good, but I've got to do my best. I made a commitment." And I didn't get paid. Street fairs you don't usually get paid. So I started thinking, "I feel like shit, but you know what? I have the power." I remember thinking, "I have the power to be great, and I need to use that power today." And I—and I started out—there was a smattering of people, but by the time I was done, I just had throngs and throngs of people going, "Yeah, yeah! Oh my God, that is hilarious! Who are you? Where are you from?" That was fun. That was fun because I did not feel well, I physically did not feel well, but—

KMD: I'm shocked that you do performances that don't make you any money.

MP: Exposure.

KMD: Exposure. Maybe someone you'll meet, or is there any of that?

- MP: Yeah. That's how—you know, when you're first starting out, you do anything and wherever because you want exposure, and you want the practice. Live performance is live performance. You can rehearse all you want in your house, but you need an audience. So that's what it is. It's the audience. And it's just the thrill.
- KMD: The work that you do—I mean, I asked you this stupid question last time: comedy, stand-up comedy versus performing arts, performance art. So—I get the sense though that you're doing both. I mean, you have [a] preference, but you do both.
- MP: Yes, I do both. And in a show, I'm going to always end up doing some type of stand-up comedy in my show, in my own space, and I enjoy it. But for me to go to a club, presently, to go to a club now and be in the lineup of stand-up—no. It's a whole different setup. So in my own space, in my own show, I end up doing some type of stand-up, yeah.
- KMD: You were talking last time, that your sister—I think it was Eleanor, you said that you're funny, but she's hilarious, or something?
- MP: Yes. Yes.
- KMD: Is she stand-up—you're laughing just thinking about her.
- MP: [*laughter*] She was—yes. She has done some stand-up in her day, yes. She was emceeding this club in—I forgot the name of it—Richmond or Berkeley?—East Bay, some East Bay club, up in the Bay area. And—because her philosophy was that she's over fifty so she's a battle-axe and she doesn't give a shit. So she doesn't have a name, she's not trying to be a career. So that's why she would have fun, and that's why she was funny because she would just—and then she got herself this little blonde wig, and pretty much anybody who puts on a blonde wig who's not blonde—it's a funny thing. So she's had this wig that she takes, that she's used, that she brings to parties. “Should I bring the blonde with?” “Yeah, with the fake vomit and the fake dog doo-doo. Bring it all. We're going to have a party.” Yeah, so she's done performances. This poster here of *Riquisimo*?
- KMD: Yeah.
- MP: She produced that. It was this all-Latina revue in San Francisco where she lives, and we had it at the gay and lesbian center there, because she's affiliated with that now. And it was just a fun, fun show that I emceed, and she came out in the very beginning. She greeted everybody, and then she brought me onstage. And to this day, people stop her in the streets going, “When are you going to have *Riquisimo II*?”
- KMD: So what kind of material does she do? Is it similar to yours, or—
- MP: Yeah. When people see us together, they say it's like looking at twins because our mannerisms and our speech patterns are so similar. And when we were living together years ago, people would call up—she was a sales rep, so her clients would call [her]. I would answer the phone and I would say, “No, she's not here,” and they would think that Eleanor was just joking. And it would be a few minutes convincing them that—
- KMD: You're not Eleanor.
- MP: I'm not Eleanor. So yeah. And then what she'll also say is, when we're together, she always [says], “You guys, I taught her everything she knows.” And that's kind of true in a way.
- KMD: Really?
- MP: Because when I'm little, I see her doing performances for the CYO, I see her doing little performances in the house. I see her doing little sketches at Notre Dame when she's going to high school. I'm seven and she's seventeen. So I see her doing these—I see her being a clown onstage. I see her being funny.
- KMD: CYO is the church group, right?
- MP: Catholic Youth Organization.
- KMD: Catholic Youth Organization.
- MP: Yes. And she belongs—she's involved with that, and they do various things. And one of the things that they do are—they put on shows, they put on little sketch shows. So I see her do that, being goofy with her friends. And then I see her, when she's socializing with her friends, they come over—she's got some funny friends. So I'm seeing her performing with her friends at the house.

KMD: Is it big sister idol?

MP: Yeah. Pretty much.

KMD: And she knows it.

MP: Oh God, yeah. She has coined herself “the Chicana Swifty Lazar.” [laughter] Yes, and she—we called her—’cause we used to call my dad Pal, short for M.P., so we’d call her Pal Jr., because she’s very social. She likes to talk to people, to go to the masses. She likes to go to the people.

KMD: Tell me about emceeing. Is this—that’s a lot on your resume, and I’m assuming it—you’re quite popular. People are inviting you to emcee their events because you’re funny.

MP: Yes. And you—an emcee keeps the show together, keeps the evening together. So it’s similar to teaching. You’re just keeping it together—

KMD: You’ve got to take what’s coming, moving it in the right—

MP: Yes. It’s spontaneous. And I think that the pressure is not so much on you because you’re not the main event. I always put—what I say, “I’m just a funky, two-bit emcee.” That’s what I do.

KMD: You enjoy it?

MP: Yeah. I feel it’s—yeah, because the pressure is off.

KMD: What are the most memorable events that you got to emcee?

MP: That I got to emcee? Oh, let’s see. I did the gay and lesbian film festival in San Francisco years ago, and that was really [fun]. At the Castro Theatre, this huge beautiful theater, and there was just—two thousand people plus, and just being silly, and people responding to that. I think I emceed chunks of the San Francisco Gay Pride Festival. I think I did—that was with Marga Gomez. I think we did—there’s, you know, you’d have little chunks of slots, and I think we emceed for about an hour. And you’re talking about three hundred thousand—just way too many people, where you could see people laughing—when you can actually see throngs of people laughing at your stuff—you go, “Hmm, this is fun. Yeah, I’ll do it.”

KMD: You see the crowd moving.

MP: Yeah. They’re pulsating because they’re laughing at your stuff. That’s fun. Emcee, other emcees—the *Riquisimo* show. That was super fun, super fun.

KMD: What about the worst ones?

MP: The worst emcees would be—

KMD: The ones that you dreaded afterwards or during?

MP: Gosh. I really can’t recall. I guess because [being] the emcee, you’re not the highlight. So there’s not that—like I said, the pressure is not on you, so you can’t really mess up too badly.

KMD: What about the length of the evening going on too long?

MP: Oh, yeah. The length of the evening, that sucks. That’s really bad. Because—the other thing that’s kind of hard to deal with as emcee, you’re kind of keeping everything on time. You think you know who’s going to go for so many minutes, and then they don’t. Then let’s say you’re in the bathroom. [laughter] You’re in the bathroom because you have to go to the bathroom, and somebody just walked off the stage, and you’re just “Hi! I was in the bathroom, sorry.” Yeah, that not being ready is always—I mean, you can play with that.

KMD: Do you make money off those events, when they invite you to emcee?

MP: Not as much. No.

KMD: I’m trying to get a sense of how someone in your area of the arts, how they pull together a living.

MP: For me, most [of the] money comes from out of LA, performances on universities.

KMD: Right, you had said that last time. So I guess the good news is, you make a living in the field that you enjoy.

MP: Yes. And these last three years, I’ve been teaching a lot as well. So teaching, and writing and performing, doing—going that route, as opposed to having to break down and work at Bank of America. [I] have come close, because the money—sometimes there’s just no more money to be found anywhere. But something always just—some temp, some funky, two-bit temp work comes in at the last minute.

- KMD:** Your work with VIVA, that was supposed to be—was that intended as a long-term project. I mean, you basically put queer arts on the map.
- MP:** No, I did not intend that to be a long-term. Actually, I guess I didn't intend to get so involved as I did.
- KMD:** I mean, reading over your CV again, I was just—this arts anthology that was put out in 2000. I mean, everybody's quite aware of the role you played. And for this project, I'm curious about the role that you played in the visual arts. I mean, you have that background, but it's not your—it's not the thing you tend to do.
- MP:** Right, right. Visual arts with VIVA?
- KMD:** Mm-hmm.
- MP:** Yeah, the visual aspect—Miguel Angel Reyes was the artist in the know. He knew just tons and tons and tons of people, and he would wrangle in all of these artists. So I guess if anything, we would have board meetings—maybe we'd say, "I don't know if we're going to use this guy again."
- KMD:** Were you pulling out their portfolios to decide—
- MP:** They would just bring work over. Sometimes they would be present. A lot of times they wouldn't be present.
- KMD:** And the board's making a decision—
- MP:** The board's [meeting]. "Yeah, let's do it. Yeah." And most of the time, that was [the decision-making process]. "Yeah, yeah, let's do it." We didn't have a big huge discussion.
- KMD:** Right, right. But not a lot of space even to exhibit.
- MP:** Correct, correct. If there was an exhibit, we usually [co-produced] with somebody so that we could use their space because we had that small little office space in Silver Lake. But I think what was happening when we [discussed] something, it was about, "We need to bring in more women." Dyan Garza was on the board, as I said before, and she was doing her work. And she was doing her work and just trying to make [a] connection with other women. If it was just a general VIVA event, it always tended to be more men. And it wasn't until we did *Chicks and Salsa* that we actually saw the throngs of women who existed. And we came to the conclusion that women liked to go to all-women events. They live in a male world, so when they wanted to go to an event. They wanted to go to all-female.
- KMD:** And do you mean—what I'm thinking of, in my own experience, it's heterosexual, queer women like to go to all-women events, not just lesbian.
- MP:** No, it was mostly lesbian.
- KMD:** It was mostly. Okay.
- MP:** Yeah. It was lesbian.
- KMD:** So in trying to round out the balance by gender of the program, I guess Maria Elena Boyd is mentioned in this document.
- MP:** Yeah. We showed some of her work, but I didn't really get to know her.
- KMD:** But what I'm trying to get at is, you know, you guys are making these decisions. It sounds like it's the group, the board is decided, "Oh, yeah,"—there wasn't a lot of "No." It seems like anybody could come forward.
- MP:** Correct, correct.
- KMD:** But who decides what goes up on the walls? I mean, did you feel—
- MP:** I think that was left to the—
- KMD:** The artist, or the—
- MP:** It seemed like Miguel put a lot of these events together, and we just trusted him. And also, too, you have to remember, it's all volunteer and nobody's getting paid except for me, as Teatro VIVA. And, you know, as board meetings go, you don't want to hang out. You don't want to be there for hours and hours. "Okay, who's going to do it? You're going to do it?" "Okay, whew. One less thing for me to do."
- KMD:** Did you ever regret anything that went on the walls?
- MP:** Probably.
- KMD:** But you don't have a clear memory of a particular piece or a particular artist?
- MP:** No.

- KMD:** What about the auction or sales that was done? Was that a fundraiser?
- MP:** Yeah. VIVA—when we had events and there was a fee at the door, that always went back into the group, to our next event.
- KMD:** Was there an art sale that I read about?
- MP:** Yeah, we had various art sales, Christmas sales, art sales.
- KMD:** Were you a part of those, or was that something else?
- MP:** Yeah. I was there. I was present. I produced it.
- KMD:** Was there a sense of, like, what sells better?
- MP:** Yes. The better things were what we considered Chicano, actually, the things that sold were the male erotic stuff. That was always number one. Because the items that came to us were male, were queer men. The majority of people that would come to these sales were queer men, so, gosh, it makes sense.
- KMD:** And they're mostly painters.
- MP:** Yeah. Queer men.
- KMD:** I think only one photographer that is consistently mentioned.
- MP:** And that is—
- KMD:** Isn't it Lorenzo?
- MP:** In that particular piece of literature that you have in your hand right now is produced by two males: Luis Amparo and—the other artist, what's his name?—
- KMD:** I just had it.
- MP:** Oh, my God, I can see his face— Rubén. Rubén—his first name is Rubén. His last name is [Esparza]. I haven't seen that guy in years. So two men are producing that event, producing that journal. And does it seem like it's well-balanced with men and women?
- KMD:** No, there's only two women in the arts, and then even in the texts, the narratives, there's only a few women.
- MP:** Yeah, that's what sold. It was mostly erotic stuff or things ingrained with Chicano [culture].
- KMD:** What would that be?
- MP:** Like *loteria*. *Loteria* arts, religious stuff, themes of the Southwest.
- KMD:** Really?
- MP:** And then Dyan's stuff sold. And at the time, Dyan was making figurative stuff—naked women. What else? It was mostly figurative, yeah. But stuff that was abstract? Interesting, but people are like, "Well, no."
- KMD:** Were you ever surprised at what sold or what didn't?
- MP:** No.
- KMD:** You figured out right away, huh?
- MP:** Yeah.
- KMD:** Were there any requests from collectors or galleries for pushing a certain look?
- MP:** Oh, gosh, any requests? Probably. I can't really remember, but—
- KMD:** The folks that were buying, did you get a sense that they were collectors or did you have a sense that they were just—
- MP:** Yeah. No, no, it seemed like they were collectors, and then maybe we would get some phone calls. "When is Miguel going to have another sale?" they would kind of ask. Teddy Sandoval was really big, and he was connected with VIVA, so, "When is Teddy going to have another sale?" So you had those people. But yeah, it was just—it was hard to find female artists, painters.
- KMD:** How did you guys go about that?
- MP:** I guess just through Miguel? And I guess we—because Miguel was so connected to everybody, and then I think we did put out—we put a call out, just a press release sent out. "If you know anybody, please have her get a hold of us."
- KMD:** It's fascinating, the reach. I was trying to understand from my notes and what I could gather at the archive. This was a broad-based arts organization, a multi-interdisciplinary—

- MP: Yes. Yeah, and if we had had more—towards the end there, we had Vangie Griego, who was a filmmaker.
- KMD: What was the name?
- MP: Vangie, *V-A-N-G-I-E*, Griego, *G-R-I-E-G-O*. She has had some films out in the last five years. So if she had been more involved, I'm sure we would have gotten more filmmakers. We had had choreographers, dancers, we would have gotten more of that.
- KMD: I'm just curious how you—you're pulling together these amazing events that are in many fields in the arts. Did you ever have a sense of—did you see that there was a coherence in the field of lesbian and gay arts, or—that never crossed your mind?
- MP: That—
- KMD: Well, just as the way you said, "Oh, Chicano art—there's this thing." Could you describe some of the trends and themes in queer Latino arts?
- MP: Well, AIDS was a big thing, definitely.
- KMD: And what aspect of the disease were people talking about?
- MP: The artists, the artists themselves had AIDS, or were HIV-positive. So they would depict that in various ways. [Artists] who were using their own blood to—you know, doing pictures of men who had passed away. Joey Terrill was big on that. A lot of his work was just portraits of men who had died of AIDS.
- KMD: Any other themes you'd noticed?
- MP: Yeah. Female erotica, male erotica, portraiture. Miguel Angel did. He was photographing people's mugs, and—you know, "What are [you] doing, Miguel?" He was always doing something. And he got commissioned by the Metro people, and he made these huge portraits there. Maybe the length, the width of this and the height of this?
- KMD: Well, that's at least eight feet, and then maybe fifteen [feet]?
- MP: Maybe fifteen, or let's say ten or twelve.
- KMD: A little closer to a square.
- MP: Yeah. And so he painted everybody's big mug on slabs on Hollywood and—God, what's the intersection?—Hollywood and Argyle in Hollywood somewhere, when they were just building the Metro, one of the big huge Metro stops. And my mug was one of them. Huge, huge. So it was—you know, here's a queer person, a real life queer person. That's what Miguel was doing.
- KMD: As opposed to the caricature of a queer person.
- MP: Yeah. It was real life. That was a cool thing.
- KMD: Did you ever take anybody to go see it?
- MP: I think I did. And I have a photograph somewhere. I wish I knew where that was. But as Dyan would say, "That doesn't look like you. The eyes don't look like you." I [said], "It's just his interpretation, Dyan. It's okay. And it's not even me, it's just his version of me." But yeah, and then I think [VIVA] did have discussion or arguments about people coming to the—people we didn't know would come into the event expecting queer Chicano art, what they thought that was going to be. And maybe we did have questions, "Do you guys have [a certain type of art]?" And then I think then we kind of did a whole little joke about, you know, "They're expecting two tacos fucking. What did they expect?" I think we had that type of discussion.
- KMD: So there was a critique.
- MP: Yeah. Just this impromptu critique. Yeah. But I think that's what I liked about VIVA, it was always this mixed variety.
- KMD: That was refreshing to you, that there wasn't a constant of the same, as you said, Grandma's braids, and—
- MP: Braids, yeah. Yeah, that there was a nice variety. That was always important to us. We would always try to argue that, "Less Grandma's braids, more Grandma's Cuisinart."
- KMD: Where do you think your work fits into those trends that you're identifying?
- MP: I don't know. I don't think you can really pinpoint my work. I think I fall under many things. And I think that's been a good thing for me, and that's also been—that's worked against me.
- KMD: How do you mean?

MP: People can't really categorize me. "Well, what is it that you do?" I'm not just—I can't just be like one—just a writer. I'm a writer and a performer, and a producer.

KMD: And a producer, right.

MP: And a screenwriter. So it's like, "Ah, too many—we can't put you somewhere." Yeah.

KMD: Do you want to talk about New York City?

MP: Okay. I'm in San Francisco—it's 1986, and I'm feeling done. Monica does San Francisco. And I'd been going back and forth to New York, because my sister is there and her friends are there, her girlfriends [are] there. And they'd been telling me, every time I go there for these little one-weekers, these little fun weeks of New York City, "You should live out here. God, you could probably go to NYU. I don't see what you wouldn't get accepted." Blah, blah, blah.

KMD: So you'd finished your bachelor's degree—

MP: Yes.

KMD: And they're talking about, like, an MFA program or something.

MP: Yes, yes. And I had thought about that when I was in school. I was like, "Oh, I wonder . . . God, NYU. If I could get into a film school, it would be NYU." So it gets talked, talked, talked, talked, talked [about], and so I think, "Okay. You know what? I'm done with San Francisco. I'm going to go to New York. Yeah, I'm going to go to New York." Do I apply to NYU? Do I do any research? No. I just pack up my bags, and decide at the end of November I'm going [to] go, [at the end] of '86, I'm going to go to New York. I'm going to go stay with my sister, and I'll just eventually find a job and apartment. You know, handheld, I'm—it's '86, I'm twenty-seven.

KMD: Not things you do now, that spontaneity?

MP: That is correct. *[laughter]* So, you know, I sell my car, say goodbye to my family, have the last Thanksgiving—you know, I'm a big drama queen. So I move out there, and of course they announce, "This is the coldest winter, the worst winter we've ever had here in New York City." I'm thinking, "Why am I doing this?" So I apply to NYU, and of course, I get my rejection letter. "Sorry, nice try." And it's hard to find a job, because I'm just looking for waiter jobs, and even that's hard to find.

KMD: But, wait, if you're applying in November, you're applying for the spring?

MP: I forget what I did. It's the—

KMD: You're not doing the typical—

MP: Right. So I'm going to—my plan is to go in the spring, is to start spring of '87—I go there in '86, and spring of '87. Yeah, I'm [doing] things all backwards. You know, it's backwards.

KMD: You're young, you didn't know better.

MP: Yeah. It's having a post-acid syndrome. So this excitement about me being in New York, it's starting to crumble. I had no luck about finding a place to live or roommates. The waitress job that I had, the restaurant is falling apart. It's not good. It's not good. And I'm thinking—and I don't like New York. For one thing, I don't have any money, so I'm seeing the ugly parts of New York because I don't have any money. And it's cold, and I just missed California. I missed everything about—I'm a California girl. I just missed everything about it. And at this time, there's no Mexican food there, really, so I don't see people who look like me. My sister's there, but, you know, she was working, and she has a girlfriend. So I'm just, oh, gosh. I'm thinking, "Fuck, why did I move the farthest east possible? Why am I here? What am I doing here? I've got to get back. I've got to get back to California." I can't go back to San Francisco because I just left there. I can't do that. I do not want to live with my parents. Oh my God. I do not want to go live with my parents. I can't do that. LA! Yes, LA, Los Angeles! Land of opportunity! My friend Vivian, she said I should come here. "Vivian, can I come?" "Yes."

KMD: So you stayed basically a couple of months?

MP: I stayed four months too long.

KMD: *[laughter]* Four months too long. I have to ask you, the drug experimentation in high school and college?

MP: Yes.

KMD: Does it get beyond that, then? Are you doing too much and not making smart [decisions]?

MP: Oh, no, no, no. I'm not doing—

KMD: So it's still—it's recreational drug use.

MP: I'm not doing drugs, no. I can't do drugs now, I'm just—

KMD: No, I mean then, then.

MP: In New York?

KMD: Yeah.

MP: No.

KMD: Before you went, you made a comment about you were like, you know, a bad acid trip or—

MP: No. I did [*overlapping dialogue*].

KMD: Was it adult hindsight commentary here, or . . .

MP: Yeah, no, my acid days stopped when I was about nineteen. So now I'm twenty-six, twenty-eight—twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. So now I'm thinking—now it's in my brain, "I'm leaving New York." My sister got me the one-way ticket, typewriter in hand, suitcase in the other.

KMD: Oh, really?

MP: That's how long ago, yeah. Typewriter, suitcase. And I come to LA, and [I'm] just so relieved to be back in my state. But it's not my city that I grew up in. It's not the weather that I grew up in. But I'm back in California so I'm just kissing the ground, but I'm also just dreading the consequence. I know one person. I don't have a job, I don't have a car, my money is dwindling, I'm going to have to tell my mom that I'm back here. Ugh, God. I'm going to have to ask for money—ugh, God. All these things I'm going to have to—

KMD: It was humiliating at the time?

MP: Yeah, my ego was squished. I was like, "Oh, I'm a loser, I'm a loser."

KMD: Oh, really? So where's this very strong sense of the positive thinking—when does that develop? It sounds very '80s—

MP: It comes—here, when I get here. So I land here, lucky that Vivian picks me up at the airport. She kind of just says, "It's going to be okay." I'm a mess. I'm sobbing. I'm like, "What am I doing? Why did I do that?" So I just—and I'm weak. I can't even, like, walk around the block, I'm just—

[*break in audio*]

KMD: We're on tape 4. This is Monica Palacios and Karen Mary Davalos on August 14, [2007] and Monica was telling me about coming back to Los Angeles—no, coming to Los Angeles from New York.

MP: So, I get to LA, and I'm a mess. And I don't have a car. I have five hundred dollars, maybe. So I know that I have to call my mom and tell her that I'm back because it was a big deal that I left. You know, she was very sad to see me go and very concerned for me that I was going to go to New York. And how—you know, what was I going to do and why was I doing it? But she knew that my sister was there, so that kind of made her feel a little bit better. So I talked to my mom, and the first thing she says is, "Ay, Lisa"—because that's my nickname in my family. It's Lisa. Because when I was little, when I was first born, my father said that I was so beautiful, that I was the perfect Mona Lisa. And also, "Mona Lisa," the song by Nat King Cole is on the radio. So that's kind of why. You know, trendy. So it's Lisa. So that's what she says to me, "Ay, Lisa. What are you doing? You can't just be . . ." You know, she scolds me. And why not? She should.

KMD: She didn't sound like she scolded you much in life before.

MP: No.

KMD: But you knew you blew it.

MP: Yeah. I was dreading the phone call because I knew that she was going to [say], "What? What are you doing? You can't . . ." "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." So I listen, listen, listen. Then I go, "Can I borrow some money?" And I think she said some other things. But, you know, she didn't cuss me out. She was just concerned about me. And then, of course, she loaned me some money. So that makes it a little bit better. But I knew I had to get a job immediately, and I wasn't thinking—when I got here—I wasn't thinking about

performing, [or] writing anything. I just was thinking of money. I had to get a job. I got to get some money. Quick cash. What should I do? Waitressing—quick cash. So, being that I did not have a car, I went and applied to jobs that were within bus distances and easy to get to. And I went to look for the big houses, big restaurants—

KMD: Well, you had landed in—what part of Los Angeles?

MP: Glendale.

KMD: Oh, Glendale.

MP: Of all places, Glendale.

KMD: Oh God.

MP: It's between Burbank and purgatory. So, trying to make the best of a horrible situation, waitressing seemed the best for me, and I went to various restaurants. Like I said, just the big names where I thought I was going to make money—quick money. Big money. And one of these restaurants was the Smoke House—home of the world-famous garlic bread. In Burbank. It's right across from the Warner Brothers Studios. So I thought, "Okay, that looks pretty fancy shmancy. I'm going to get in there." So I did. I bullshit-ed my way about it. I had experience—I did have experience, but not as much as they probably wanted me to have. So I go there, and I notice that many of the waitresses are in their seventies. So I went, uh-oh. Okay. But then I hear from the manager who was really young, he goes, "You know what? Yeah, we're hoping that some of these elderly women are going to stop working here because, you know, they're elderly." Which is, you know, that's just bullshit. I hated that part of it. But I said, "Yeah." He goes, "Come in. Let's see how you work. Let's see what's going on." So I go there and I just, I said, "Yeah, I'll do it." I was desperate. I needed the money. It's come back to that same statement.

So I am, at the time, the only queer person working at this place—that's what it feels like. And these women that I—and it's mostly women. They are my age, late twenties to late seventies. The women who are older had been working there for thirty-some years. Thirty-five years. It's just amazing. But it's a steak house. And they're known for their world-famous garlic bread. When people come in and sit down, the first thing you say, "Can I get you some garlic bread?" It was—yeah. Hated it. Bottom line, I hated it right off the bat. But I had no choice. So, but one thing that does bother me right away is, you know, you have the waiters, and you have the bus boys and the cooks, and they were all Mexicanos. And as I had come to find out, prior to this experience, Mexican men in the restaurant business, for me—this is my experience, ladies and gentlemen—were always just really sexist and just constantly harassing me. One of my first restaurants was Pepe's on the Pier at Pier 39. And those guys were constantly saying things to me. The cooks were saying things to me like, "Oh, Monica, I know why you are the way you are. It's because you haven't been with a real man. *Un hombre.*"

KMD: That's in San Francisco.

MP: San Francisco. Okay. Because this is what I'm—I'm a queer comic and my name is all over the place, so they know that I do that. And then one of the women there who worked that place—her name was Terecita, and she was this large Mexican woman—and she made this big announcement one time that she—guys were harassing me, and then the next minute, she says to everybody—she doesn't look at me and say this, but she just makes this announcement—she goes, "Oh, I'd rather be a *puta* than a lesbian."

KMD: Ay.

MP: So that's what I was working in before the Smoke House. So now I go back to the Smoke House and it feels pretty much the same. I feel like I'm going to be harassed all the time. And pretty much that's the key—although the elderly waitresses were very nice to me. Very nice to me. They would go out of their way to help me, and I [would] go out of my way to help them, at all times. There were a few bus boys who were very nice to me, but the majority of the men there were always harassing me.

KMD: Did it affect your manager—did he give you the worse time slots, or were you able to—

MP: Worse time slots? No.

KMD: Well, you know, there are certain hours that you make more money.

MP: No. I wasn't the best waitress. I didn't crave more tables. As a matter of fact, I would give away my tables, because I really—my top thing was four tables, two people at each table.

KMD: That's all you could handle.

MP: That's all I could handle. I couldn't do the big, huge things. I just hated it. You know, it's like, "Uch, why am I here?"

KMD: How long did that last?

MP: Two years too long. And let me tell you ladies and gentlemen, those guys harassed me to no end. If—these were my thoughts—I really should call the cops on these guys because they are harassing me so much. They never physically hurt me, but verbally . . . But I thought, okay—

KMD: That's dangerous.

MP: Lets zero in on this. I thought, "No, you know what? If I call the cops, half of these guys are going to go back to Mexico." I felt sorry for them. Like a jerk. Like a jerk. So I just put up with their shit.

KMD: So you were doing the romantic, grandma's *trenza* thing.

MP: Every single day. "Monica, I love you. Hey, Monica, come home with me." And they were married. These guys were married. But then they're also doing this thing where finally, we have a gay waiter—an out gay waiter—who was my ally, my only ally. And they're—oh, my gosh. They are constantly harassing him. "Hey Ron, hey Ron, bend over. Hey Ron, come over here and suck my dick." Constant. Constant. Constant. Constantly. And, what's also very interesting is that they're saying that to Ron, but then they're also pretending to be lovers themselves. So that's when I noticed, I go, "You know what? Mexican men, or Latino men, they have this—they're closeted bisexuals. They're closeted gay men. That's what's happening here." They would do it so much. And then me and my other ally waitress friends would say, "You know what? They probably go in the back and they suck each other off." And I would think, "You know what? You're probably right." The way they were constantly touching each other. Constantly. Constantly.

And then, one time, during all this—I do some gay event. I go somewhere and this white guy comes up to me. "He goes, I'm going to ask you a question. I don't mean to be rude," he goes, "but do you think—is it true that Mexican men are just bisexual? Because every restaurant job that I've worked at, I've had Mexican men come up to me and try to get sex from me." He goes, "Everywhere. Every single restaurant that I've worked in in Los Angeles." And I said, "Hmm. Yeah, okay, I think they are." So that's something that sticks in my mind, is that these guys who harassed me to no end and harassed my queer friend, Ron, to no end, they just seemed closet cases themselves.

KMD: This was more affectionate, or a different kind of affection than you'd seen with your family—you know, your extended family? Men being comrades—I don't know what the word is, but chummy together.

MP: Yes.

KMD: It was different.

MP: Oh yeah. Yeah, they would touch each other's crotches.

KMD: Oh, okay.

MP: Their asses. "Hey, give me your *culo*. Hey man. Hey, *joto*, hey, hey." You know. Yeah, it was nonstop, that. I mean, really, I should have called the cops. They were being disrespectful to everybody.

KMD: Had you had any other incidents like that, where it was a constant, every day homophobic—

MP: Yeah. When I worked at the San Francisco Mexican restaurant. Yeah. So finally, I just put up with it for two years because I was getting benefits, and I needed the money.

KMD: Oh, really?

MP: Yeah. That's how I got health insurance.

KMD: Wow.

MP: I don't have it now. I can't afford it now, but that's how I started it. And so I just got to a point where I was going to be thirty, and I just wanted to work on my stuff. I just wanted to work on my performing and writing. So that was my goal. Because before I turned thirty, I was going to quit that job. And I turned in my notice that I was going to quit, and I said, "I'm going to quit because I'm going to pursue my career and I'm

going to see the world.” I wrote that in the note. Like a dork. So I up and quit that job. It was hard. That was hard. That was really hard to be there in that type of environment.

KMD: That sounds really toxic.

MP: Yeah, it was. It was. And then some of the women who I’d liked, they were just so backwards in their thinking, though. They would talk about their husbands and say things. I’ll just never forget [one woman], she goes, “Oh, yeah, I never let my husband see me without my makeup.” I go, “Oh my God, what year is this? Is this the ’50s? What?” It was just backwards. I always called it the restaurant that time forgot.

KMD: Did that kind of experience affect your work?

MP: Yeah. It’s in my show. Yeah.

KMD: So is that how you worked through it?

MP: Yeah. So there’s chunks of that. “Home of the world-famous garlic bread.” I’ll be the judge of that. And I was doing a bit prior to this restaurant about—when I was a waitress, about—I used to hate how men would order for women. The women wouldn’t speak. So then I did this whole routine where I come across that. And then I make the woman order for herself. And I tell her, “That’s great, okay?” And I empower her, and I empower her. And I say, “Great, don’t you feel much better? Now, turn to your husband and demand oral sex.”

KMD: This is part of the stand-up routine?

MP: Yeah, I just took that little chunk and I put it in a performative setting when I did my one-person show.

KMD: I have a couple other questions that are going to take you all over your lifetime that I hadn’t been able to pin down. When we were talking about the art with VIVA, the visual arts—I should have asked you, but I didn’t. I’m sorry, I was interested in the story you were telling. The artists were getting a percentage from those sales, or, like the other performances, the money is going back into—they’re like donations.

MP: Let’s see, let’s see. I think maybe each individual has worked out a little setup with VIVA. If I sell this painting, 50 percent goes to VIVA, 50 percent goes to me. Or 20 percent goes to VIVA. It was one of those type of things. But a lot of the artists donated the whole thing.

KMD: Donated the whole thing to the organization.

MP: And the money would go to the organization, yes.

KMD: Wow. People were happy to be doing that?

MP: Yeah, we did a lot of benefits. A lot of people gave a lot of their time and their product. No problem. No problem.

KMD: Because that wouldn’t go over at all today.

MP: Yeah. No, it’s expensive to live today. You know? That’s what the bottom line is. Even when benefits come my way, it’s like, “Can you pay me at least gasoline money? Can you give me at least fifty bucks? I need something.” Which is true. I mean, I think that’s totally fair.

KMD: No, I agree.

MP: You know, so . . .

KMD: Also, in terms of VIVA—and maybe even other collectives that you’ve worked with like Culture Clash—did you see it influence your artistic expression?

MP: Working with these groups?

KMD: Yeah, working with these groups. Did you ever go, “Oh, that’s where that came from?” Or maybe even consciously going, “Oh, I really like the way somebody did that.”

MP: Probably. I think working with VIVA, being with other queer Latino artists, it empowered me. And I think it put me more in tune—more connected with my Latina self. My Chicana self. Definitely. Because prior to VIVA, I was—the things that come out during my connection to VIVA are very Chicana-identified. So, yes. And also, too, I just think it’s me just ready to make that deeper connection with my Chicana self—Latina self.

KMD: It’s not like you were, prior to that, ignoring it or denying it.

MP: No, no.

KMD: It's just not the material you were doing.

MP: Correct.

KMD: I mean, because you went to school in places that were—you know, Chico and San Francisco had a large population.

MP: Of Latinos?

KMD: Yeah. Yeah. Or not large, but larger than going someplace else.

MP: Right. Right. Yeah, I wasn't in the Midwest somewhere. Yeah, definitely. Definitely. VIVA really influenced my connection.

KMD: Can you think of a particular piece that you reflect on that—

MP: Well, I think just—this piece I call *Taquería Tease*, where I'm watching a woman from across the way eat a *carne asada* taco, and it's turning me on. What else?

KMD: I'm curious—the way you see that being, specifically more Chicana. Latino is the food, the language you use, and the references?

MP: Yes. Yes. And it's also—I think it's just, it's me being around this certain collective of people. But it's also just me as an artist, seeing what's going on in the world, the trends that are happening. I know it's contemporary. I mean, I just feel very contemporary with what's going on.

KMD: Can I change gears then?

MP: Absolutely.

KMD: So I'm a little uncomfortable asking a question like this, but I know there are people who will be curious about your—if your first experience with a woman was used in part of your work, influenced part of your work, became part of your creative expression?

MP: I think the first experience with a woman was a relief. It was a release. It was me hitting myself on the forehead going like, "Ah, this is what I was missing. This is what it feels like when people talk about butterflies in your stomach. Oh, okay." And I think that just made me feel better as a person, as a whole person. "Oh, that's why I didn't feel comfortable in my own skin. I was trying to work this out." I think it just gave me more confidence as a person. "Oh, okay. All right. Now I can be my 100 percent self." Prior to that, you know, I knew something was not right with me. So now that I know I'm a lesbian. "Oh, okay." I think it just made me complete. That's what it did. It gave me a clearer head.

KMD: Did the relationship become part of a skit? Or a—

MP: No. No. Very first time? No. Very first woman? No. No. Yeah, because I mean, coming out—coming to terms with me sexually was the same time I was coming to terms with my performance self. With my comedy self. So yeah, it boosted my confidence and just made me feel good about myself. That's what it did.

KMD: And you're getting that kind of reinforcement from the family. And what about friends? Were there any folks who—or did all your friends already know?

MP: [*laughter*] Let's see. Gosh, who were my friends at this time? After high school—I didn't see anybody from high school after high school. Because the woman that I had the intimate connection with was a friend from high school, who—

KMD: Same age cohort?

MP: Yeah. So it was her. And then other people that I'd come across at this time period—I find out that she's a lesbian. Oh, well, of course you're a lesbian. So I'm no[t] seeing anybody who's gasping "Oh my God!" Yeah, there's no shock. Nobody's shocked.

KMD: You talked about getting your students to do a technique to get them writing their firsts. Can you give me a list of firsts?

MP: Oh, first times?

KMD: First times.

MP: Oh God. Let's see, there was that—summer for me, the first time to take acid . . .

KMD: Now, you've got to give me some kind of year of grounding, so I—

MP: Okay, that would be '77. The first time that I realized that my sister and I are super funny together, that's the same year—'77. We were "God, it's fun to hang out and just laugh." "Yeah, okay, let's do that." First time going on stage.

KMD: And that's in?

MP: That's in June of '82. What else? First time being in front of throngs of people. And that would be at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Parade. First time kissing a woman and realizing this is the real deal. What else?

KMD: You're halfway there.

MP: The first time my mom saying [when I was] in high school—the first time my mom saying that I can't do something because we don't have enough money.

KMD: Really?

MP: And I was like, what? Where did that come from?

KMD: Because what you described before sounded very—

MP: Right. Exactly. So that's why it was very odd to me.

KMD: Because they knew they made wise choices on what to spend their money on?

MP: Correct. So her using that against me.

KMD: What was it? Do you remember what it was?

MP: What??

KMD: Like skates, or movies, or—

MP: No, no, it was me going on a ski trip.

KMD: Oh!

MP: For the second time. Because the first time I went.

KMD: High school?

MP: High school, yeah. My freshman year. And then when I asked to go again, she said, "No, because we don't have enough money."

KMD: Arranged with the school?

MP: Yes. Yeah. Yeah, it wasn't just me and my friends taking off. It was all arranged. Yeah. And I couldn't say anything, because. So that—yeah, I was like, "What? Do you know who you're talking to, Mom?"

KMD: You've got four more to go. Can you give me four more?

MP: Let's see. First time my father had a heart attack. That was a big deal. Even though he drove himself to the hospital. It was my family really freaking out and not knowing what to—not having the answers right away. That was really fun.

KMD: When was that?

MP: Gosh. I'm not in high school. I'm in the sixth grade?

KMD: You're kidding.

MP: Twelve?

KMD: He's young.

MP: Yeah, I think it was late fifties that he has it.

KMD: And there was no side effects from the—

MP: We just had to change his diet, which wasn't that intense—which affected us, because we had to change our diet a little bit.

KMD: Less McDonald's?

MP: Less salt. "No salt? What?" You know, he stopped smoking. But he wasn't even—I think he smoked maybe two cigarettes a day, maybe. So that was a big deal. First time—probably the first time I had smoked pot. I think the first time hanging out with the girlfriends, which would coincide with my freshman year at Notre Dame. So just being immersed with a bunch of women, that was—I like that. Not knowing really why. Was it because there was some attractions, or it just felt safe? I don't know, but I remember thinking, "hmm."

- KMD:** Because you weren't doing that really—so you and your brother—if it was anybody, you and your brother, your mom and your dad, the four.
- MP:** Right, right. And then—
- KMD:** And family events were not girl-heavy.
- MP:** No. And I was doing things with friends from school, but not on a regular basis. I mean, I was playing sports and stuff like that. But I just felt older. I think that's what it was. Feeling like a teenager. Feeling like a bona fide teenager with the friends—with the female friends.
- KMD:** Hanging out.
- MP:** Yeah. And the first time I get on the varsity team—varsity basketball team. I like that. That was great. That was a great experience to feel that. And I was the only freshman.
- KMD:** What position did you play?
- MP:** Guard. I was fast. I was a good ball stealer.
- KMD:** Okay. [*laughter*] Because you're really short. I'm sorry. Yeah, you're short. I have a hard time envisioning any Chicana-Latina doing basketball or volleyball. Although my sister did both, and she's shorter than I am.
- MP:** There you go, there you go.
- KMD:** Yeah. I think that was ten. Did you count them?
- MP:** Was it?
- KMD:** I was counting.
- MP:** Ten-ish. I'm trying to think. Oh, probably the first time getting busted by my mom. For doing drugs.
- KMD:** Uh-oh.
- MP:** That was not a good thing.
- KMD:** Was that high school or before?
- MP:** High school. Yeah. Because my boyfriend at the time, him and his rowdy-ass friend, Jim, they stole some fresh marijuana plants. So he comes to my house at four in the afternoon, on a weekday, and he's laughing, and you can tell, like, he's a little bit sweaty. [He has a] big hefty bag. He goes, "Just take this." We have so many more in the trunk. Just please take this. And he pulls it out. And it's a marijuana plant. And there's still dirt on the roots.
- KMD:** Where do you get them?
- MP:** Right, right. He goes, "Just take it, just take it, just take it. Okay."
- KMD:** Ay ay ay.
- MP:** I take it. My mom's in there making some enchiladas. I mean, it's just crazy, right? That's just a crazy thing. And so we dry the leaves—my brother and I dry the leaves in our room. Get the pizza pan, a lamp desk. Dry it. Okay, it stinks. Marijuana, as a fresh plant, stinks. Drying it stinks. I guess my mom wasn't paying attention, because she was as sharp as a tack with anything. She knew—
- KMD:** She probably kept a clean house, too?
- MP:** Yeah.
- KMD:** Was she wondering where her pizza pans were?
- MP:** I don't even know—this, to me—I can't believe that she—I guess she was distracted with something else. So anyway, that night, my brother, he—
- KMD:** Wait—the boyfriend delivers it in the afternoon—
- MP:** And he splits.
- KMD:** And you dry it that day?
- MP:** Yes.
- KMD:** And you were going to smoke it that night?
- MP:** Yes.
- KMD:** Okay.
- MP:** It's just ridiculous, right? It's absurd. And my brother's been getting in trouble a lot. He's going out and he's not supposed to go out. And so he's been causing my mom a lot of pain, and he goes to this party, and he's

not supposed to. And he pretends that he's in the bed, and he puts the pillows underneath the bedspread to make it like he's still there. Okay, it's just a really—the tension is building for this night. I'm by myself. I'm watching television, and I go, "I know what. I'm going to try that pot that my boyfriend brought me." So I roll a joint. And I just figured if I blew out the window they weren't going to [be able to] tell, because they were already asleep, right? And I just—a couple of hits. Boom! And I had just put everything away, because I didn't smoke the whole thing, I just put everything away in the shoebox. So then, boom, my mom opens the door. "Que estabas haciendo?" "Uh, I was, uh—I was lighting matches." "No, you weren't." "I was smoking a cigarette." "No, you weren't. Estabas fumando marijuana." And she just—it was as if she caught me shooting up heroin. She was just so disappointed. And I think she started crying. And my mom never—my mom ruled with an iron fist. So that she was crying. And then supposedly my dad was crying. And I will never forget that.

KMD: Did they know there was more? Did they find out there was more of the plant? No?

MP: No.

KMD: What did you do with it?

MP: I forget. Maybe sold it. Or—I don't think I sold it because I wouldn't know how to do that. I think I just gave it back to him, maybe. The boyfriend.

KMD: The bad influence.

MP: So that, yeah—freaking my mom out—freaking my parents out like that just felt so, like [I was] a horrible child. I don't deserve to live.

KMD: That was a low point.

MP: Yup. Yeah. Very low point.

KMD: But it sounds like there were so many, many high points.

MP: Oh, absolutely. Yes.

KMD: Family gatherings, and . . .

MP: More so.

KMD: Caring and loving parents.

MP: Yeah. And then my parents were always very open to anybody that we'd bring home.

KMD: Meaning?

MP: For dinner, or for—come home from school, and they would just, "Hey Mom, this is my friend, Carol." Yeah.

KMD: Did you have African American friends?

MP: In high school I did. Joy. Yeah, we were good friends.

KMD: What about the family Christmas and—

MP: The big holidays?

KMD: The big holidays that are Catholic especially. Religious.

MP: How was that dealt with?

KMD: Yeah.

MP: At the house. Meals—big meals. It wasn't, you know . . .

KMD: Mexican family?

MP: Yeah. I mean, we didn't have Mexican meals for holidays. It was whatever was traditional. Thanksgiving, turkey. Christmas—what happened for Christmas? Christmas was breakfast.

KMD: Oh, okay.

MP: And it's only been of late that we've been having Mexican food. But when we were growing up, it was—standard breakfast. Yeah, lots of food, and people. Immediate family, and if you had a girlfriend or a boyfriend or a friend and you wanted to them to come over.

KMD: Oh, just the immediate family. Not the extended?

MP: Oh, the cousins?

KMD: Yeah.

MP: Oh God, no. There's too many. Out-of-control too many.

KMD: Oh, really.

MP: Yeah, that would have been a riot. That would have been Woodstock.

KMD: So when the family got together, it wasn't for the particular holidays, it was just people got together on the weekends and—

MP: Yeah, as a matter of fact, for a while there, early '70s, we would have Sunday dinners. My mom would make a roast.

KMD: Wow.

MP: Yeah, and then, so we would invite friends. So it was always this big thing. And I think that's when my sisters—I guess I'm not too sure why it started. I guess that's when people have money. So, "Hey, how do we—let's do this thing on a regular basis." Yeah, big, huge dinners like that, every Sunday.

KMD: Did you ever end up with a negative association with food, or was it always a positive association?

MP: Food in our family is always positive.

KMD: Yeah, I just remember eating a lot and being sick. We got together on Sunday, but I ate so much, it was like, "Oh my God, not another Sunday." I would always overeat, that's why I was asking.

MP: No. No, no, no. No, it was a good day.

KMD: So you're father passed away in 2002?

MP: Yes. And this is after his massive heart attack. Then he has a massive stroke, and then he has little strokes. And so, finally—and by this time, he's really weak. He's getting around on a wheelchair. And he had a heart attack, basically. He had a heart attack. That was it.

KMD: So he had declining health for many years?

MP: Yes. And his heart was working at—I forget, some low percent, 12 percent or something ridiculous like that. So the fact that he was still alive was a miracle.

KMD: And your mother cared for him?

MP: Yes.

KMD: Alone?

MP: Pretty much, because they lived in that little studio that she lives in now that's attached to my older sister's house. So they would help. My sister and her husband would help them a lot, but it was my mom who would help him out of bed or put him in bed, or . . .

KMD: I'm thinking about your relationship with your father in your childhood. You were very close. You said you were his sidekick.

MP: Yes.

KMD: What did it end up like as an adult? How would you characterize that?

MP: I didn't see him as often. You know, by the time I was—let's see, nineteen? That's when I moved. Living—yeah, I went to—

KMD: Should I close the door? Is that bugging you? I'll pause it for a minute here.

[*break in audio*]

MP: Where am I at?

KMD: Go ahead.

MP: Father? Oh, so my relationship as an adult—young adult—I move out. So I don't see him on a regular basis. But when I see him, I'm happy to see him, he's happy to see me. And he's still making sure that I'm changing the oil by myself. "Still changing that oil? Want me to help you?" We're still doing practically the same things. I'll pull out his guitar. I'll start playing his guitar. He'll start singing. But that will be happening less and less and less.

KMD: Right. When you're moved out.

- MP:** When I'm moved out. And I talk to him about what's going on. Maybe we'll sing a song. He'll pull out his guitar and sing a song. But also, too, he's not getting older. He's not playing the guitar. It's just not—you know. He's just not as lively. He's just not as active. He can't be.
- KMD:** Did either your father or your mother see any of your performances?
- MP:** Yeah. My mom has. My dad did. And I forget what he said to me. I forget what he said. Something like, "Hey," and my dad—even though he gave me the nickname of Mona Lisa, he would call me "Monique."
- KMD:** He would call you Monique?
- MP:** Yes. So, you know, "Hey, Monique." Yeah, he came to one performance, and oh my God, I forgot what I did. I think he was just proud that I was performing. Because he always talked about how he would love for his children to create a band. A family band. That was always a big thing. So that I was up there doing queer comedy. It's a band.
- KMD:** [laughter] And Monique was your stage name?
- MP:** You know, it was as good as it was going to get. And then he would kind of forget that I did that. He goes, "So, what is it that you do?" I go, "You know Dad, I'm a storyteller, pretty much. You know, kind of like what you do. I'm doing what you started." And [he] would just kind of go, "Oh, okay." You know. But I never talked to him about me being queer. Me being lesbian.
- KMD:** Well, I don't know if anybody goes to their parents and say . . .
- MP:** I know people who—yeah.
- KMD:** I mean, beyond this is who I'm bringing home or this is what I prefer. I think my sister is the only person in the world that talks to her mother about sex, is what I'm trying to say.
- MP:** In the world?
- KMD:** In the world. I don't think I've ever met anybody from my age group that says they have conversations about sex with their parents and get advice.
- MP:** Oh, and get advice? Wow, that's stretching it. That is stretching it. Yeah, so he knew that I was performing and I was writing stories. He liked all of my girlfriends—partners and just friends.
- KMD:** Did you share your published work with them?
- MP:** Published work.
- KMD:** I mean, because you had a quite prolific publishing career.
- MP:** I guess they knew of it. And then—I mean, my sister Eleanor definitely knew and read—was up on it. And I guess my sister Clara has read some stuff of mine.
- KMD:** I'm not talking about the performance material that gets published.
- MP:** No, but like, the anthologies.
- KMD:** Yeah. Or the column you had.
- MP:** Right. Right.
- KMD:** So there's quite a bit of writing going. You didn't bring that home? You didn't send that home?
- MP:** Nah.
- KMD:** I guess the other part of the question would be, does anybody in your family do that kind of stuff, "Hey, this is what I do for a living," and show it off in front of the family?
- MP:** No.
- KMD:** No. Okay. So there would be no cause for you to—
- MP:** No, my father—my parents were never like that. My parents were not show-offs. They just, "This is what I am. This is what I do." So I didn't. And I guess also, too, I just figured—I [don't] want them to say anything negative to me.
- KMD:** Did you have a voice back there that gave you the impression they would, huh?
- MP:** That could have been a possibility. Like I said, when I started doing the performance, you know, my mom would be, "Oh, why do you have to be up there talking about being a lesbian?" And that's a legit question. You know.
- KMD:** Worried for your safety. Homophobia.

MP: Exactly. Worried for my safety. I think that is the number one thing. So I just did—yeah. I didn’t want anything negative to come out of it. So I didn’t bring that up. But he would always ask me, “So, how’s your friend, Fat-tima? Where’s she?”

KMD: Fatima.

MP: Fat-tima.

KMD: So you had to play it. Was he a pun—is that his kind of humor? Verbal puns?

MP: Yes, sometimes he would do that, yes.

KMD: So a whole range of comedy, this man.

MP: Oh yeah.

KMD: We talked before about his plastic poop, or what was it?

MP: Yeah, the gag drawer of fake vomit and plastic dog doo-doo. That was my theatrical training.

KMD: You should be proud then, right?

MP: Yes.

KMD: You went a step above that.

MP: Yes. Yes.

KMD: This is changing gears again, if you don’t mind. You know, Latinas going to college. It’s still a rare thing.

MP: You think so? I guess, yeah.

KMD: Yeah, well—no, we go to two-year college and we stop.

MP: Or trade school.

KMD: Yeah. That’s what we go to. But we don’t go to four-year. So were your other friends that were Latina—the Chicanas that you knew from your area where you grew up—because they’re probably not in your high school—as you said, it was mostly white gals—were they going to college?

MP: I’m going to say [Los Angeles] City College. I’m going to say that.

KMD: What about the cousins?

MP: Cousins. No. The cousins are graduated from high school, and getting a job—some standard job somewhere, like cashier or . . .

KMD: And of the six brothers and sisters, how many went on to college?

MP: Me. Eleanor got a degree—BA. And then my brother Art—I forget. He was two units away from getting a BA. Never got it.

KMD: So two out of six.

MP: Yeah, so cousins—the women that were in my neighborhood—it was the two-year college and then a job, and then thinking about marriage. And then I remember distinctly thinking, “Oh man, I’m going to fucking live before I get married—if I get married.” You know, still thinking that I was heterosexual. That was ingrained in me since I was a child.

KMD: What was?

MP: That—not to rush out and get married.

KMD: Oh, not to rush out and get married.

MP: Yeah.

KMD: Your mother and your father teaching you that?

MP: Who’s teaching me that?

KMD: Or was it your older sisters?

MP: I think I was just seeing my older sisters. I mean, they’re involved with men, but they seem independent.

KMD: And no, “When are you going to get married? When are you going to married? When are you going to have kids?” None of that was happening.

MP: Right. And so my eldest sister is the first one to get married. And she gets married young. She’s twenty-two. So that kind of suffices that need in my parents. “Whew, at least one of our kids has gotten married.” And it was a big wedding. You know, I was the flower girl. Had my hands inside my muff for fourteen hours. We joke about that. There are pictures of me—my hands were never out of my muff. “Did she have

fingers?" And I was the only one because I was the flower girl. And the ring bearer was my brother-in-law's little brother, but he backed out at the last minute. He was this super-shy guy. So it was just me. Once again, it was just me. "Hi, everybody." Yeah, so that was a big wedding. Big deal.

And then after that, my next sibling, Art, he gets married quietly. The next wedding is Marty. She gets married in the backyard of my sister Clara. So it's not—I mean, it was [a] big thing, but it was contained. It was in the backyard. So my parents, you know—I don't hear my mom saying, "Oh, we have to have a big wedding and we have to have this dress." My mom wasn't a girly-girl like that.

KMD: Really? I thought you said to me that she always was dressed and—

MP: Yes. Yes. No, she looked—when she went out in public [she] looked nice, and even at home looked nice. But I never saw my mom in front of the mirror doing the makeup thing.

KMD: Not a femme.

MP: No, my mom is a—what's the word? Butchy femme. Is that a word? Sure. Yeah, so there was no need for that. And the women that she hung out with—maybe there was couple of them who I would categorize as femme-y.

KMD: Cha-cha.

MP: Yeah, but not so many.

KMD: Some very sensible women in your life.

MP: Yes. Yes. Definitely. Absolutely.

KMD: Would you define them as strong?

MP: Yes. That is a perfect word. Yes. Strong. Independent. Know what they want. Speak their minds. But it's interesting because my mom isn't saying, "Be strong. Be independent. Speak your mind." She's not telling me that. It's just ingrained. It's just understood.

KMD: She's modeling it.

MP: There you go. Perfect. Yeah.

KMD: Have I missed anything that we should be talking about?

MP: Let's see . . .

KMD: There's something in your notes that you wanted to mention.

MP: I can't think of anything right at this moment.

KMD: They have a question that they like us to ask. It's like that essay at the end of the year. So I apologize, but it's the kind of summing up, like where do you see your work having been? Where it's going now. How do you think you fit into the field of—well, I can say many fields: queer art, queer performance, stand-up, performing arts, Latino arts.

MP: Summing the things up. I think I'm going to continue to do what I'm doing. I'm a writer-performer. So I'm going to continue to go down that road. Right now, I am writing a screenplay because I am determined to produce it as well, and direct it as well. I think, "Okay, is that going to put me into the filmmaking business, or am I going to just make this one film and then probably die, because it will take every ounce of life out of me?" I don't know. I'm excited. But I'm also a little—just a little nervous about our world in general, because we're just—lots of things are happening right now in the world that we're living in. America isn't number one. America isn't really respected. I think that's a concern of mine. I joke with my friends, "We're going to blow up in ten years."

KMD: Not out of a sense of patriotism, but just out of a sense of where we are in the world?

MP: Yes. You know, we've pissed off a lot of people. I'm just hearing of more and more deaths, homicides that are happening around me. You know, global warming. I mean, fortunately, I'm doing what I want to do, but at the same time, the world is in turmoil right now. So I'm concerned about that. And I'm thinking, "God is this—live each day to the fullest." That's in the back of my head. I can't help but think about that. Where I see, as a professor, I see these young kids who are eighteen, nineteen, twenty, and I see them living these carefree lives and being like, they have no idea. Are they going to even see forty? I think about that. I don't share that with them, but I think about—I don't know, you guys.

KMD: Are you concerned about that?

MP: You know, all this electronical gadgetry that we have—that's got to affect us somehow. The cell phones. Because for the longest time, I didn't have a cell phone, because I thought, I didn't want to have an extra bill. And I didn't want to get a brain tumor. All those things have to have an effect on our bodies. They have to. They have to. So I'm just concerned about—I'm excited about the future, because it feels like I'm going to be—not feels like—I know that I'm going to make this film, and who knows what's going to happen after that? But at the same time, I am concerned. I am concerned. Because it feels to me, when I was [growing up] in the late '60s, pre-pubescent, and then going through puberty—that whole sensation of the '60s—and watching, like, the National Democratic Convention on television and just feeling the urgency and the turmoil of the world. That's what it feels like now.

I was talking to Dyan Garza the other night about this. Just kind of going, "Hmm, something big is going to be happening. It's going to be a good thing and it's going to be a bad thing. So how do I fit in? What do I do? Is there going to be a new show out of this? What's going to happen? Am I going to have time to write that show? Is this going to be a big old explosion? Is there going to be a big tsunami? Because if there is, I'm gone."

KMD: You're too close to the beach. Yeah, you're gone. I hate to tell you.

MP: I'm gone. There was an earthquake the other night. I don't know if you felt it. I was up because I couldn't sleep and it shook me. And I since the 1992 Northridge quake, I have that post-earthquake syndrome. [The Northridge earthquake was in 1994—ed.] It freaks me out. So I'm excited, but I am definitely concerned. A lot of good things are happening in the art world, performing world, and the filmmaking world.

KMD: But the things beyond your control are the scary things.

MP: Yeah, they're big.

KMD: They're intense.

MP: They're big. And I don't think people should take it lightly. And I'm not. I'm not taking it lightly. So I'm happy to be living, but something's coming.

KMD: Do you think it will reshape your work?

MP: I think so. If all that's left is the delete key on the computer and nothing else, I think so. I think so. Yeah. You know, I mean, gosh. You keep talking about the big earthquake, and I look around and go, like, "Wow, do I know how to turn off my gas? Do I have enough water? Shit, I shouldn't have eaten that can of beans, because that's my earthquake food." You know what I mean? Yeah. I'm very influenced by international [affairs], just internationally what's going on.

KMD: Do you read the paper, or do you get it online?

MP: NPR radio. And I just kind of quickly read the paper. Quickly look at just the top news. Headlines. The war in Iraq is just so out of control. It's just so sad. People are dying left and right. It's just ridiculous. It's like all for what? Is it worth it? And then hearing people talk about, "Oh, yeah, my son. He did it for this country." Yeah, but was it worth it? Really? You're happy about that? Your eighteen, nineteen, twenty-one-year-old son? Are you really that happy about it? No. It's bad. A bad thing. So just kind of one day at a time. All right. I'm trying to do as much as I can before the explosion happens. I think that's kind of what it feels like to me. You know, these opportunities that come my way—okay, I'll do it. I'm going to do it. Give it my best shot.

KMD: All right. Here's my plan. I'll listen to the tape. If I'm missing anything. If I know, specifically from the guidelines if I missed something or I didn't tape it because I made a mistake, then I'll do a follow-up.

MP: Okay.

KMD: Okay? Does that sound good? Or if you think of something, jot that down, because I'm certain there's going to be a follow-up at least.

MP: Right.

KMD: But I want to thank you.

MP: Yeah. And if you want me to expand on something . . .

KMD: Yes. That will definitely be part of the follow-up.

MP: Because I'm thinking, "Hmm . . ."

KMD: Places where I didn't interrupt you.

MP: Did I talk about that long enough?

KMD: Yeah. Okay. Thank you.

MP: Hey, are we done? [*laughter*]



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