

Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Oliva Espín

*Interviewed by Cynthia de las Fuentes
Los Angeles, CA
January 28th, 2005*

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OE: Oliva Espín, Interview Participant

CF: Cynthia de las Fuentes, Interviewer

CF: Thank you for coming today and for being interviewed. I am very honored and feel very privileged to have this opportunity to talk to you today.

OE: I am honored to be interviewed.

CF: Thank you, thank you so much. I suppose where I'd like to start is asking you a very broad question that will hopefully guide us through narratives or stories of your life that may tell us about how you became the woman that you are today. So tell me a little bit about your experiences from your childhood, the experiences in your life that helped you become the woman that you are today, this professor Emerita, this famous Latina psychologist. Can you talk about some of that?

OE: It's hard to know what were the experiences that made a difference or not, in terms of this specific question. I know the things that felt important and probably the most important is the story I told this morning, that I was on the one hand living a middle-class life, and on the other hand being very, very poor. My father was fired from the navy in the 1930s, when I was two years old, by Batista in Cuba. And suddenly there was no livelihood, so what he did is he started a small school and it was a very bad choice of location and a very bad time, in economics of the world, because of the second war and the end of the depression and all that. But basically the school had four, five rooms in the front and we had two rooms in the back.

From being two, three years old, I had to be quiet. I could not disrupt whatever was going on. So I did a lot of fantasy play in silence with little characters that I invented; and then when I learned to read, I read incessantly. I read all the time. So I think finding pleasure and sort of compensation from reading; it's something that made me into a scholar. It made me into a good student, so I wanted to learn more and continue learning more.

I think, as I said this morning, the experience of keeping a secret was something that was very hard, pretending that I was a middle-class girl, while wearing used clothes and not eating anything that I really liked eating. I don't want to paint it that it was such a bleak picture, but at the same time, it was. It was hard. It was hard, so that also made me understand what it is to have a hard life and what it is to have to compensate for things that are not there.

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And the other thing that was playing at the same time is my uncle, my father's brother, was very impressed with how clever I was. I think my father also was, my parents were, but my uncle had

the resources that my parents did not have. So, I was writing poetry when I was seven years old and he took it upon himself to publish my poetry. And it was a little mimeographed booklet – it wasn't like it was anything, but, you know, to have your poetry published when you are ten years old, it's like, "okay, so I can publish books" (*laughs*) – this kind of sense of doing that.

After that, I think it was the experience of immigration – the experience of having your world disappear and having to adjust to a completely new world. And I was twenty years old when I left Cuba. So, it wasn't like I was a little child not knowing what was happening. I mean, I was already an adult in some sense of things. And suddenly, the world wasn't there. Before then, there was another thing that was a curious thing that I think was helpful. There was a program of questions and answers on Cuban television. I sent in a letter saying that I could answer questions about religion and they called me and I made four thousand dollars! And \$4000.00 in 1958 was a big capital!

CF: Winning a lottery.

OE: Right, exactly. So, because it was almost like a surprise, I said I wanted to go to Europe with that money and my father, he first started saying "just what are you talking about?" and at the same time he just couldn't say no. So I went to Europe alone at 19, in 1958, from Cuba. And that also, being able to negotiate a world in a different language and all that... I think was an interesting experience in the sense of what you *can* do.

I was also very religious from a very early age and what I did was try to imitate the lives of saints. So, I tried to imitate Joan of Arc. I put a rag at the end of the broom and I would jump on chairs and, you know, I was going to conquer the world with that kind of behaviour. So the fantasy and those possibilities that happened taught me that it was possible to do some things. And right after leaving Cuba, I first went to Spain and then was in the States for a very short period of time, and almost immediately went to Panama and to Costa Rica. And being in Latin America and observing Latin America without it being Cuba – I mean, observing something that was too close to me and that meant losing my country did not really let me observe. But, being in a place that was distant enough and, at the same time close enough, made a very big difference.

And I remember very vividly, I was twenty three years old when there was this conflict in the Panama Canal and I knew it had been, you know, young students who wanted the Panamanian flag there and when I went to the States to visit my family at the end of that year, everybody was saying that the communists had assaulted the Panama Canal. And I thought "what?!" So, it sort of gave me a political perspective about what you hear in the news and what the common idea is of what's happening and what you actually saw with your own eyes. So those years in Panama and in Costa Rica were very much a learning experience of Latin American realities. Well, also, I was maturing. There was that identification with Latin America that – I don't know if I'm saying it clearly – when it was in Cuba, it was too close, it meant losing my country, so I could not think. I only had the pain of what was happening, but the observing the reality of Latin America without having this "I'm going to lose everything" helped me see things that I would not have seen otherwise. I also had, at around twenty or twenty one, a series of anxiety attacks, panic attacks that I think had to do with all the anxieties having to do with all these things, but it made me also empathize with psychological suffering, with what it meant to be in pain psychologically, not being quite sure of what that was.

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But even before then, my favorite teacher in high school was a psychologist. We took a high school psychology class and the moment I took that class I said, "that's what I want to be." So it became a conflation of things and, well, I don't know if I answered your question, but that's the general picture of how I got to where I got...

CF: How you got to Costa Rica and Panama.

OE: And then here, you mean?

CF: Sure and then you started studying psychology in Costa Rica?

OE: Yes. My undergraduate degree in psychology is from Costa Rica.

CF: Uh-huh, and then in my understanding...

OE: I went to Belgium with a fellowship for a doctorate in psychology. So I learned French in Paris and went to Belgium. I made the mistake of getting married and the marriage didn't last, so I came to the one place where I did not have to pay rent, which was where my parents were living and that was in Florida, at the time. They had lived in New York for many years but at that time they were in Florida. So I ended up getting my doctorate at the University of Florida, in Gainesville, because I was a resident of Florida, so I could go there to do that. When I graduated

CF: What year did you graduate?

OE: '74. Because of all the changes in countries and all that, it took me 13 years to finish a BA, because it was one course here and one course there, so it took me forever to do that. So I got my PhD in '74 and at that time I went to Montreal to McGill University and the position was to teach courses, but also to supervise francophone students, because I had learned French. The professor who normally supervised them was on sabbatical, so I was there for a year. And from there I went to Boston to Boston University and I lived in Boston for fifteen years. And now I've been in San Diego for another fifteen.

OE: How did you end up in Boston?

CF: Because the position in Montreal was a year. It was substituting for that one person during the leave of absence and when the positions opened for the following academic year, one of the places that was available was Boston University and it seemed a very good place, so there I went.

CF: Tell me about your experience in Boston.

OE: Well, my experience, the city of Boston, I love, I love to this day. I hate the weather (*laughs*), but I really love the city of Boston and all the friendships I made there and all that. The experience at the university was not necessarily a positive one. Ronald Levant was there with me, we were working in the same department, and then later on Patricia Arredondo was in the department also.

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So, it was not an easy place to be, but despite that I was there for eleven years. And then I was at Tufts [University] for four years and they gave a number of different reasons, but basically they did not want to give tenure to anyone. None of us got it. And at Tufts it was basically something having to do with my sexual orientation and they would never confess that that was the case, but that was it. That was what happened. The dean said my writing and my scholarship and my teaching and all that were all mediocre and six months later I got the APA Distinguished Contribution Award in 1991, so it was clearly something different than that. You know, through the grapevine you find out those things. I don't know, maybe I shouldn't be naming these institutions, but...

CF: That's fine

OE: For different reasons, both of the experiences were very unpleasant. San Diego State has, on the other hand, been absolutely marvelous. Being in the department of Women's Studies with women and men, because we do have men students, who really are interested in gender issues, is just, it's unbelievable, to have people who you have things in common with. And in the years since San Diego, at the same time as I have the full-time job in women's studies, teaching psychology of women and other things, I was also working part-time at the California School of Professional Psychology. And CSPP had me continue to connecting directly with psychology, training psychologists, while in women's studies I wasn't training psychologists per se, although I was teaching psych of women and the psychological experience of migration and writing about that. I mean I am a psychologist, so that's where I come into these things.

But having all these colleagues who have all these different disciplines and have a different take on things, different knowledge about things has expanded my horizon unbelievably. Like I am looking at something and they are saying, "Have you read so-and-so?" and had I been in psychology I would never have read so-and-so. Because no one in psychology knows who so-and-so is. But these anthropologists or philosophers, sociologists, or political scientists know that what I am trying to say has a lot to do with what this person has said, so then that literature helps me create an in-depth understanding of what I am trying to say and then put it out into psychology or into psychological language. So, it's been a wonderful fifteen years to do that. And now I am officially retired, but I can still come back a semester a year to teach for a few years, so I get the best of both worlds. I work one semester and then I am on vacation for 8 months. So it's perfect.

CF: That's wonderful. You talked a bit about in the past how your experience of class pain and transition, disconnect, and pain from leaving home, but if I heard you correctly needing to feel a bit of individuation while staying centered in the Latina self?

OE: Yes.

CF: And how your understanding of that and the pain of marginality helped you become the woman you are today. How did that experience, or the pain of marginality – we talked about class, we talked about sexual orientation and gender – how did that translate into your career work, into your research work, into the stories that you investigate?

{18:08}

OE: Well, what happened is I was beginning to teach. One of the first courses I taught at BU [Boston University] was counseling bilinguals. And there was no literature. I had to basically

make it up. This was early seventies, mid-seventies. So, there was practically no literature. So there was this need to try to put something out to the students and just saying things in class sometimes was not enough. Plus, there were conferences, be it Association for Women in Psychology or APA or what was then the APGA, the counselling association and regional groups, etcetera that wanted information on this, because you are teaching a course on counselling bilinguals, you know everything about it. Well, I knew nothing. There was nothing to get it from. I started talking at a conference and people asked, "Can I publish that paper?" And then the paper is published and then some people start writing and saying, "Could you mail me this paper?" This is before email, remember? Or websites, or things of that sort. So, "Can you mail me the paper?" So I found myself more and more... And there were some papers that created a reaction in people that almost surprised me.

CF: Such as what?

OE: I wrote a paper that I presented at a conference in New York about sexual issues of Latinos. I needed to know what was going on here, so one way of trying to make sense was to try to write it. And I did this presentation, the paper got published as a chapter in the book that was sort of the proceedings from the conference. And it was constant. Wherever I went, there was somebody saying, "Oh, that paper was so important," particularly young Latinas saying, "Oh I am so glad that I read your paper because it made me understand that it was not just me." And I was hearing them and at the same time thinking, "hmm... maybe I have something to say." You know, this is not just for me to make sense of my own experience, it seems to be resonating with the experience of other people.

There was a conference on lesbian psychology in Boston and I wanted to make sure that there was something having to do with Latinas in the conference, so rather than just talking about, what I did that time, I sent out questionnaires to whoever I could think of and I got about thirty responses. And out of those responses, I created an article – that has been published, and published, and published, and published and people ask for copies it – on issues of identity of Latina lesbians. It was a mixture of my needing to make sense of my experience, my needing also to say, "this is here," because there would be a lesbian conference, or there would be a women's conference, or there would be a Latina conference, multicultural conference, whatever, APA, and it seemed that there was only one thing, like we are going to be talking only about *this*. And these are the women or these other sexual experiences or these other the ethnic experiences or whatever, it's not even spoken. So, I started all this writing trying to say, "here, you have to look at this," in the middle of conferences, for example.

I remember one conference, I wouldn't mention what it was, but I remember I was there presenting something with a group of my students about how the effect of our own ethnicity, whatever that might be, affected who we were. And there were more presenters than audience in the room. A couple of times we also found that nobody even came to things that have to do with cultural issues or things that have to do with sexual orientation issues, and it was very hard, because it was like... well, that story I told this morning also, of trying in a group of Latinas to talk about sexual orientation and somebody saying, "lesbianism is an illness we catch from the American women." So, okay, so who did I catch it from? It was very hard to say.

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And sometimes people who were very politically aware would make statements about how it was American imperialism that created homosexuality in Latin America. It was like, just what are you talking about? So, it was the need to put that in.

Of course, in church it was impossible to talk about sexual orientation. And in places, even to this day, when I am talking about, in groups of gays or lesbians, anything having to do with religion or spirituality, frequently I get told, "Oh, please! That's so childish!" or "That's so old," or whatever. Or, "I can't believe that you still believe in those fairy tales," all sorts of things like that. So, constantly having people say things that contradicted my own experience. I mean, I am perfectly comfortable with myself. I don't have any problem with myself. The problem is when people are pushing me and saying "No, this is not true," or "You are disloyal to this group," or "You are not doing what needs to be done." Well, I think you remember at the Latino conference you organized in Rhode Island, practically no one came to my session on Latina lesbians. And I remember riding with one of the speakers and they asked me what I was presenting and I said what I was presenting and they said, this was a distinguished Latina psychologist, "Is that important?" And I said, "Well, it's important to me (*chuckles*) and I think it's important to other people." And then the satisfaction that comes when, like in that session of that meeting, some young women would say, "I am so glad that I read your book, because it's speaking about my experience. Finally I see that this is not just me, that this is the way of understanding things, so thank you for doing that." And that, sort of, keeps me going.

CF: Your work is always honored the integrity of a person. I've always felt that your work is always, where psychology and others would want us to disengage ourselves and compartmentalize, to disassociate ourselves from our own self, your work has always been about keeping us integrated, keeping us centered and integrated, honouring all aspects of ourselves. Where did you learn that? How could that come from a Cuban family that's traditional, from a church that's traditional, from an American profession that's traditional. How did you learn to honour or how did you know that honouring your voice would be your career path, something that you needed to do for others? How?

OE: I don't know how, and I can say that at some points it was actually a little foolhardy to go this way, but there was a sense of "this is it, I know this is the truth of something, I know this is the core of something," and there was a lot of self-doubt around it. Maybe I am doing qualitative research, because I am afraid of statistics. Maybe I am doing these things, because I am afraid of doing the *real* psychology. But there was also that little voice inside saying, "but this is the reality. This is real. I know this is it. I know this is important. I know this is there." And challenging people at meetings, for example, and saying I know this is what needs to be done. Now where did I get it? I don't know. When I was at BU [Boston University] here was a nun who was vice-president, she was associate provost. And I was in an affirmative action faculty committee or something. And I don't remember what I said about counting numbers versus really doing social justice. And when the meeting ended she came to me and said, "You are a credit to your Catholic upbringing," and I thought, "well, thank you very much, but I am not sure it's my Catholic upbringing."

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I am not sure what exactly did it. I don't know that I have an answer to your question except for a very deep sense that this was the truth. I don't know that this is the case, but it may have been since I spent all those years during childhood and adolescence being whoever and holding myself

together, despite all these other things out there that were not real and pretending something, but knowing that this was here and not there, maybe that's where I learned it. Maybe my Catholic upbringing, I don't know. Carol Goodenough in her presentation earlier, and some of the people who were presenting with her, they have found out that Catholic kids in high schools say that they disagree with homosexuality, but they also disagree with harassing homosexuals, because it is morally wrong, in a way that children from other backgrounds don't say it. So, maybe Sister Madonna was right, maybe it's my Catholic upbringing. I don't know. But there is that sense of this is truth, this is true information. This is the core of something. And this is the way I get at this core.

I did, for a while, try to use questionnaires, and adapt them, and translate them, and do back-translation, and this and that, the instruments that existed at the time, again we are talking the 70s. So those instruments were not doing anything. They were not getting at the experience of the people I wanted to talk to or whose experience I wanted to put out. There was also a sense of responsibility that, again, I wouldn't know where it came from, like to say, so okay I am a professor and here. I am one of the few people who has the right to say what I want to say and have people listen to it, because if not they get a bad grade. Okay, so they are going to hear what they don't hear from any other professor, because they need to hear this. They need to know that there are these things going on. And I've had clashes with colleagues and clashes in communities of colour and in other places, because I am never a hundred percent in agreement with one position that is fixed and rigid. I always say, "Oh, but look at this other thing." The same thing happens in relation to Cuba. When I am talking to people who say that Cuba is paradise, I want to try to make them see that there is a big oppression there. But when I am talking to right-wing Cubans, I am trying to show them that there are things that are happening in Cuba that needed to happen and need to happen all over Latin America. So, I don't know, maybe I am oppositional by nature or something. But I am always saying, "But, look at this other thing. Don't miss this other part. It's important in what is going on."

But I guess I am mixing in my answer why did I do it and why did I use the particular methods that I used to do it, and I guess it's all sort of connected. The method had to do with getting access to the information that I thought was essential, that I thought was missing in a place and that need to be put there. So, I was talking about therapy with women from third world countries or therapies with Latinas or feminist perspectives in therapy with ethnic minority women and things of that sort, when people were talking only about one thing. And not talking to each other. When I talked about Jean Baker Miller this morning, she is talking about oppression, women, the effect of psychological oppression on women, and she doesn't, I don't know that she doesn't mention it out of not wanting to... she doesn't know how to phrase it, or, I mean, I don't know what she knows or doesn't know. I don't want to put words in her mouth or assume things, but in her writing there is no open connection made, saying... and Paulo Freire already said this ten years ago, talking about all oppressed people. So, I think part of what happens in psychology, is that people who are doing ethnic things don't read feminist writing. The people who are doing feminist psychology don't read the multicultural. It's like they are not talking to each other and then what happens is there is a bunch of people like me who fall through the cracks.

At some level, I guess what I have tried to do is not fall through the cracks myself and also give a voice to people who are not professors who can say whatever it is they want, who wouldn't even know how to say it or how to start saying, "This is my real experience."

People who are silenced to such extent that they don't even know they are silenced. So, to be able to do that. The last book I wrote on immigrant women and sexuality was done precisely because whenever we talk about immigrant women in field of immigration studies, women are always mothers in families and that's the only way in which they are talked about. They are not talked about as individuals who are going through a process of transformation as persons. And yes, they may have families or not, but they are people who need to be listened to and their stories deserve attention. And that's what the book is – it's women telling their stories, basically. About their experience of migration and the transformation of gender roles through experience of migration. And so, that sets a responsibility to serve as the voice of people who don't have a voice, which again gets confirmed when people say, "Thank you for saying that because it's what I had been thinking but I didn't know," or, "I thought I was the only one," whatever it is they may say, which then confirms that okay, so I am on the right track.

CF: You talked about how before lending that voice, or giving voice to the voiceless and nameless was hard for you, professionally, for a long time.

OE: Yes.

CF: And yet you come here today, this morning at the National Multicultural Conference and Summit and receive a standing ovation, applause after applause during your talk itself. How does that feel, do you believe it? How do you make sense of this?

OE: I think I now believe it (*chuckles*). At the beginning, when I first received the Distinguished Contribution Award from the APA, I remember hanging [up] the phone when they called me to tell me that, and I started, "what?!" (*both laugh*) "Did I really hear this? Did they really say that?" And in my talk actually, about that, I start the talk saying this award has changed the meaning of my professional life. Suddenly I am not this person doing these things on the fringes, antagonizing everybody, being told like I was told to my face, "It's your pet issue." or "You are an activist, not a scholar," or things of that sort, "You are mediocre." Having dealt with that for fifteen or twenty years, suddenly it was like, "Oh, maybe I was on the right track after all!" And then in the last couple of years also there have been several awards. I got one from Latino Psychological Association. I got one, a career award from Association for Women in Psychology, this elder thing yesterday. And in a couple of places when I have spoken, there's some people have and tell me they have, "aha" experiences from some of the things I am saying. So, I am beginning to believe that yes, there is something that is a real contribution.

I do have to say that for fifteen, twenty years, and even sometimes now, it feels as if I am fumbling, as if I, you know, I know this is right and I am going there, but am I doing it correctly and is this what I should be doing, or am I just completely... Even this paper I presented this morning. Last night I was reading it and I was thinking this is completely disjointed. I am talking about so many things that people are not going to be able to make sense of anything I am saying. That's what I said this morning. Not only am I talking about multiplicity of identities, this paper has multiplicity of identities here. So I am never sure, precisely because it is not the usual. Precisely because I am sort of scouting new territory, or – I don't know exactly how to describe it – as I am fumbling in the dark. I am never sure if this is the right thing to do. And when I was getting denials of tenure and ridiculing and those things, it was like maybe I should go crawl in a little place and shut up or something, because I am probably not a true psychologist.

I am probably not good at doing what good psychologists do and that kind of thing. So at one level, of course, it's wonderful, and at another level it's almost a surprise that something that I think is not put together well gets a standing ovation. So although I feel more, now that I am onto something out of people's reactions to what I do – including this interview, for that matter – although there's that, there is always a sense of is this too risky? How are people going to respond? And, what I said this morning, precisely because when you belong to oppressed categories in so many counts you need people and you need people almost desperately to feel supported and to feel connected. It's very risky to antagonize those people and have them think that, "you are not one of us, go away." So that fear is always there. And that fear was there this morning when I was presenting, like how are people going to react to what I was saying? That you are trying to combat racism by being sexist or you are trying to combat sexism by being racist. I mean, I know people sometimes have reactions that are not the best or the happiest, or the whatever, to that. So, there is always an emotional risk on that, which I think takes me to something that has always been very important and may have to do with why I chose that particular form of research and writing and all that. And that is that I want to be understood and I want to be present as a person.

My relationship with my students, graduate students mostly, I want it to be a real relationship and I don't – I mean I said before I am the professor you have to listen, but at the same time, I don't do that in reality. I want to connect with them. And I think one the best things about that is that I have kept connections with students. The person who did the write up for the Elder Booklet was my student in Boston in early, mid-70's, and she is now an academic vice-president at a university.

The friend of mine that I was with in Thailand with last month was my student when she was in high school in Costa Rica. I was twenty-five, she was fifteen, now we are all... Ten years when you are an adult don't make any difference. At that time, I was a big person. She's one of the people who wrote little paragraphs for that write-up. One of my students from high school from Costa Rica who is in her early fifties, just called me last week to tell me that she has just been diagnosed with Parkinson's and she wanted to talk to me because she remembered the connection we had then and she needs to feel the connection with people. So that connection, that continued connection for thirty, forty, however many years is still something that is very important for me. And of course, as I get older and my students are still young, it's not as easy to have the same connection, but still, there are some students I have who are now in Michigan or at Clark University, or that, who are in their early thirties, who still feel very, we feel very connected with each other. And I don't have children, but I have generations of children in terms of those kinds of connections. Some students have said things like, "We really know what you think. You are there with what you think." You know, I make my point. I am present in that. It's my style, but it's my style because I need it, because I deeply need that human connection with other people. Which is why the risks, as I was saying before, sometimes are very, very hard.

CF: One thing that you talked about and you've written about and you work on, is your connection to your spirituality. Can you tell us about how your spirituality has helped shape the woman you are today, how it sustains you today, how you connect it with other parts of your life?

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OE: Yeah, that. The reason I went to Panama and Costa Rica was because I was part of an Association of Catholic College Women and I went as a missionary, not a missionary, but I went

there to create some small residence halls for girls, for college students, and to then create circles of study. One problem, of course, for people, is that they get religion in high school or whenever they are at home and then they go to college and learn all these philosophies and all these things and their theological knowledge does not progress with the rest of their education. They still remember what they learned when they were seven years old. So it was to try to do that. And I had been part of that association in Cuba, so I was part of bringing it to places. After some years of doing that, of having my life very much committed to doing this kind of work, I started getting burned out and pretty much let go of everything religion, even though it still was something that at some level was important, but back there. Then, after coming out as a lesbian, I discovered Dignity. And I started going to Dignity, so I started going to mass every Sunday because of my sexual orientation and before, when that wasn't there, I didn't want to have anything more to do with it, for awhile.

Some of the theology I learned in Latin America and theology I learned through Dignity and etcetera helped me see theologically that there was no contradiction, despite what some people were saying. If I had not educated myself, if I hadn't done the reading, if I hadn't met with people who were working on these things and who had a better theological education – because it was their profession, not mine – slowly, maybe I would have completely lost this. But I kept my own theological education going and my own learning and I still do. I still read a lot in the field and try to keep all these things together. It's very hard for me to sit in church and hear the things that I sometimes hear, so I don't do that a whole lot. But I do meditation, pray every day, read, do the Liturgy of the Hours, which is what... All over the world, it's an interesting thing, it's basically reading psalms, which are poetry and very deep prayers and because it's something that is part of the official prayer of the church, I know that whenever I do it, there is someone some place in the world doing that same prayer. And that gives me a sense of deep connection with other people through doing that kind of prayer and exploration. Sometimes it feels better put together than others. And, as I say, sometimes people make me feel like I don't want to have anything to do with this. But it's a source of life. It's a source of feeling that I have a purpose in life. That what I am doing is part of a larger picture, not only when I am doing the Liturgy of the Hours, but when I am doing whatever it is I am doing.

I don't know of the people who heard me today – twenty-year-olds who were here – what they are going to be doing with what they heard me say today fifty years from now when I am not here. But, I know that that's part of the universe, that that's part of that spiritual whatever, of being part of everything and everybody. And to continue being after I am not there, in a sense of transmitting something that has to do with social justice and has to do with doing the right thing and being good to people and making people's lives better and trying to change your little piece of the world, so you leave being better than when you came in. So that is part of that sense of spirituality. I can think that it is a plan of God, but there are sometimes when I don't know what God is. I know that it's important. I know that it's at the core of who I am and how I see my place in the world.

CF: I had this fantasy earlier, when you said that you took a risk getting up here this morning and telling your story, and I had this fantasy about how the risk that you took, although from my perspective was well-received

OE: It was, but I didn't know in advance.

{51:04}

CF: I am so glad you know that now. My fantasy was that if your fear had come true, that you had that support not only from your inner knowledge about yourself, but from your spirituality as well. Do you believe that you carry that with you, that it's supporting you, that it's your buffer against pain?

OE: Yes, very much so. And it was during those bad times.

CF: Yes, that's wonderful.

OE: Absolutely, absolutely, it was. During all the bad times, not just the professional ones, but any other bad time. That is always there. I think you probably guessed, I prayed that what I said was something that people needed to hear before I stood there. I did it this morning. I want to say what they needed to hear. I hoped they liked it, but even if they don't like it, I hope it's what they need to hear. So, yes. I mean, I probably would not be alive if it were not for that, because there were times that were very, very hard and had I not had the sense of a larger picture... Not fear of God, I never had fear of God, so it wouldn't be, "Oh, I am going to be punished if I do x, y, z," no. It's more like, there is something I have to do and no matter how hard it is, I cannot decide when that is going to stop. I have to keep going and have to keep doing it.

When I realized that I was a lesbian, I was already 32 years old. It was complicated around psychology, as I said, because, "Oh my God, I am sick, this and that." But, from a religious perspective, it was never a problem. It was more like, "Thank God, now I understand so many things." Also, now I don't have to deal with somethings that I'd be doing or trying to deal with that never felt right, but I thought I had to do them, so it was a blessing. It felt like a blessing. It did not feel like punishment, or sin, or wrong, or it shouldn't. And of course, immediately, as I said, I started reading theology around those issues, John McNeill and other people who were writing theology about that at the time, to try to make sense of it from that perspective, also. But it never felt like there was something bad about that. Anyway, I sort of took a detour from what you were asking.

CF: It's a wonderful detour, because in a way you had been raised as a Hispanic woman, believing a certain dominant narrative about what is right for Hispanic women, and being the dutiful daughter and Latina woman that you were, you pursued that and you got married and you were intending on fulfilling...

OE: ...The expectation...

CF: The expectations of the dominant narrative, of the culture. And when you discovered your lesbianism, no wonder you said, "thank God," a burden was released from you, a burden of having to adhere to a dominant narrative that didn't feel syntonik with you.

OE: Yeah, exactly, exactly, yeah. I could have lived all my life feeling dystonic about that, without knowing where it was coming from. Let me tell you another little story about Latina women. My mother was 73 years old and my father died around the time when I came out, but sort of right immediately before, so we never talked about it. But, my mother was 73 years old when I came out to her, which was a few years after that. I wrote her a very long letter and said to her, "this is it," and I basically told her, "I know you know this, but I want to say it." And she said, "Yeah, of course I knew it."

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She said, “You know, this is not what I would have wanted for you,” this is a church-going person, right, “You know, this is not what I would have wanted for you, but if this makes you happy, you are already forty years old, you know what makes you happy, and all I want is for you to be happy.” And from then on she was with my partner and this was just it. It was never – once in a while she would say things that were a little bit, not, you know, the culture coming through, seeping through with some comments about people, but never about me. And she even said, “If I had made similar choices, you may have thought this is not what you thought I should be doing, but you would have wanted me to be happy and that’s exactly the same thing I want for you.” So that felt, you know, also in terms of the dominant narratives, maybe the fact that my mother was not particularly faithful to the dominant narratives herself made a difference, because she was able to respond this way about what I was saying.

CF: One of my biggest regrets is not having had an opportunity to have this kind of conversation, for history with Dr. Martha Bernal. And I know from my relationship with her, my friendship with her, towards the last ten years or so of her life started coming out in many ways. And I remember she told me she had to wait until her parents died. She had already been cut off from her father when she decided to pursue education. He cut her off and she was alienated from the family. And after he died she was able to come back into the family, but she waited until her mother died before she felt comfortable enough to start coming out to herself, to come out to her family, and to her profession. Can you tell me a little bit about your relationship with Martha, did you have a relationship with her or...?

OE: I knew her, and we got along well, but we were never close friends. I mean there was a time she went to Boston for a conference and she stayed with me. And some other the time I was in Phoenix and I stayed with her, so we of course had things in common and overlap and all that, but were not close friends. We were just professional friends, mostly, so I didn’t know a whole lot about her. And when I met her, was around the time that she was beginning to do things that had to do with culture, at that time. With culture and curriculum, and that kind of thing, because up to that point, she had done behaviour of little kids that didn’t have anything to do with culture. So the coming out was even later than that. Well, I met her at Arrowhead at the conference of Latina psychologists at Lake Arrowhead in 1979 when the Association first started and then it ended up dying and now it’s being resurrected; the National Hispanic Association at the time. And it was an invited conference and she was one of the people there so that’s when I met her.

CF: Tell me about some of the memories of that conference. I am very curious. Who was there? What happened?

OE: Well, let’s see. It was an invitational conference, I think they got the money from the National Institute of Mental health. Amado Padilla and a few other people, I could see their faces, but don’t necessarily remember their names. So they invited a proportion of Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and others, like Columbians and Argentineans, were part of the other, the fourth group, so there was representation of all those groups. And several people presented some topics and then there was a lot of discussion and at the end of the discussions we started forming the association. We were charter members, and etcetera, for a number of years... And then it sort of started going down, so I am glad it’s being resurrected

CF: What was your impression about how the energy, how come it shifted and the association started dying? What was your understanding of that?

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OE: I am not sure, actually. Mostly the people in Lake Arrowhead started aging and getting tired and Amado, for example, I don't know if this had anything to do with anything, but he moved from UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] to Stanford and I don't know, if he was not there. Martha [Bernal] was president for a while and did a lot of work around that, but I think probably because whoever was tending it started aging and getting tired and for some reason not enough new people were coming in, or something. I actually don't know. I actually don't have an explanation for what happened, but it's very alive. I mean, this last meeting in Arizona in November, it was wonderful, full of people and energy and it was very good. So it's really back to being alive. It's very nice.

{1:02:15}

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