

University of Washington

Women Who Rock Oral History Project

Transcript

Alice Bag and Chola con Cello

Narrator: Alice Bag (Alicia Velasquez) and Chola con Cello (Maria Elena Gaitan)

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Quetzal Flores (QF): Let's start with... 1970... 1970's in East LA.

Maria Elena Gaitan (MEG): That's when I was born!! Hahaha!!

QF: Me too!! Hahaha!!

MEG: Somewhere in the 70's haha!

Alicia Velasquez (AV): 70's? I was in middle school probably. Early 70's I was at Robert Louis Stevenson.

MEG: No, you weren't! Oh my God!

AV: And my... sister... oh, nevermind about my sister. You don't want to hear about my sister.

QF: Yeah we do.

AV: I was hanging out with Cholas, because I wasn't a Chola, but I hung out with Cholas because there were a lot of Cholas at my junior high school, and the Cholas that I was hanging out with were in White Fence, and it was VNI territories...

MEG: Barrio Nuevo... don't be calling that neighborhood for the archive.. haha

AV: Well you go, I'll be giving us a bad name... hahha

MEG: Well that's interesting that you mentioned Stevenson because that's the neighborhood where I was born, so you and I were probably born in the same neighborhood. On Townsen Avenue off of Woody Boulevard. And how about you?

AV: I was born in general hospital... hahaha. But then I lived on Eighth Street when I was a baby and then I moved to Ditman - you know where Ditman is, it's right next to Townsen, right?

MEG: I live there now... geez that's amazing! So, what was I doing in the 70's? We'll I am a little older than you are. So in the 70's, let me see. My son was born in 75, and of course I was only twelve but, ha (hahaha.) I was coming out of a period of great activism. I had worked with the Farm Workers Union and done a lot of other community work and had a lot of difficulties being ultimately a spokesperson for movements and basically having men shut me up. So it was really, really hard. So, getting married and having a child was sort of a relief. Hahaha from all of that! That's an odd thing to say...

AV: So you could have someone else to boss around...

MEG: Right right I can boss around my husband and my son, right haha! So in the early 70's while you were at Stevens I may have been a TA there, that's really weird! Probably around, let's me see, Octavio was born in 75, so probably 73.

AV: 73! That's when I was in 9th grade!

MEG: Oh my God! I was there as a TA. I hope I was nice to you for God sake.

AV: I hope you were too because everybody was really mean to me.

MEG: No, I was really nice to all the kids because I loved them. They put me in a home economics room and sent me all the kids that nobody could stand.

AV: That would've been me.

MEG: God!!! So I turned it into Maria Elena's reading kitchen. And did all kinds of games and stuff with the kids and... you know, I loved being there! And it's a school from the neighborhood so I felt very comfortable... so you were a student there when I was a TA, that's really wild!!

AV: Yeah, that school was...

MEG: Messed up!

AV: Yeah it was messed up. People getting shot all the time...

MEG: Oh, all the time, all kinds of really violent things happening. And the teachers were burned out and hateful.

AV: And ineffective...

MEG: ...and on drugs.

AV: Oh well I was on drugs. Were you on drugs?

MEG: Well I can't talk about that. Do we want our kids to know this? Well, they know already.

AV: Yeah people think, you know later on when I was in the punk movement people were like, oh, there are all those drugs!!

MEG: The drugs were there since...

AV: Nothing compared to Stevenson.

MEG: No, the teachers were on drugs. I had one who was getting a divorce so she was on some kind of major drug, and she would knock out in the classroom. So I started teaching the class. I figured: okay she's not here, so I'll do it, you know?

AV: When I was at Stevenson I remember taking an algebra class, and I was sitting and you know they have those little desks, little chairs with the desks attached and I had this guy that was just... would always call me names. And one day he came into the room and I was sitting there minding my own business and he put a dog biscuit on my table. I was just stewing about it and a little bit later on he turned around and threw a dog biscuit at me, so I just got up and I was not, at the time I was sort of still kind of shy. I just went over to him, and I had had enough, and I went up to him and I clawed his face. But I didn't break the skin or anything, but..

MEG: But I tried. Hahaha!

AV: But I tried... and he looked at me, he picked up the chair, he threw it out the second story window while the teacher watched.

MEG: And just watched.

AV: Just watched, did not do a thing. And then he walked out of the room.

MEG: Wow, and that was your... wow!! There was a lot of violence and a lot of the kids were not safe. I had to walk kids home and drive kids home to make sure they didn't get jumped on the way home. So there was always... coming out of activism I had a great feeling for wanting to fix that, you know, that this was possible and so

forth. But I have to say that it's taken me a lot of years to get that working in these systems you..ahmm, you are a teacher so you know, you are working inside the system to move that mountain you just have to have incredible stamina. And you have to find the other martians around you to do it with. Because you can't really do it alone. But that's amazing...

AV: And you have to do that whole thing where you are like do it first. Do what you think is right first and wait until they tell you, you are not supposed to do that.

MEG: Yeah, don't ask for permission.

AV: It is better to apologize after you've done what you feel is right than to ask permission and be told you can't

MEG: There was a woman names Ms. Tara, who was the director of Title I which is the program that had a little bit of money. Federal money for kids at risk, blablabla, and she had a closet full of materials that nobody could touch. They were like these precious things, like somebody's special underwear that you never touch until your wedding night or something. So, I said girl!.. we gotta hold on that key and we dragged that stuff out and started using it. I thought that woman was going to lose her mind. It's just amazing, the mentality in there, was just really oppressive. There was finally a group of teachers who started a petition to get me out of there...

AV: Why?

MEG: Because I was... you know, whatever.

AV: Because you were using the materials?

MEG: Yeah, ha, because I was using the materials and teaching the kids (haha.) So, what happened was that a group of parents came to my rescue. The kids who I was helping, because I knew them, I did not just teach there, I went to their homes, I knew there parents, you know the connection. So they came to the school and God I've forgotten about that day. They came to my rescue and that was just amazing to me. I think when we're younger... I had more resilience about certain things. This business of being outcast... feels, I am talking to a punker, right? It begins to feel not only normal, but it's like a badge of honor. And that's part of what helps you get through it.

AV: Yeah, but I still remember what it felt like. When you meet young kids... I have a 16-year-old daughter that is going through that whole feeling different thing. I really, it's really fresh. All I have to do is just close my eyes and I remember what it was like, walking, across the Stevenson lawn and having an orange burst on my but that somebody threw at me, right? And you just feel the humiliation of everybody laughing at you.

MEG: That's the age too that you are sort of... the hormones are starting to rage, and the voices are changing and little girls overnight get breasts, and all the sudden... so there is this hyper self-consciousness.

AV: Yeah!! Oh my God, I have these horror stories of Stevenson and I remember this woman, because you are saying these little girls that breasts. She had really large breasts, and she'd come in, and she'd sit in the chair like this because she... you know?

MEG: ... to get close!

AV: And the guys were just like... you know? She is parking her breast. You Know? They just talked through the whole thing as if her breast had a personality. And one day we were at lunch, and a guy came up, and put the milk carton under her breasts, and said: "I want a refill please" And she just started crying you know? And we were all sitting there thinking like "What can we do?" because you know, of course, I am like the outcast. If I even go up to this girl, the only thing I would do is like bring her down even further. You are talking about now how we would react to that, and I think those guys were just. Man! I hope I don't bump into them now because... I wish we had the tools that we have now to just throw it back in their faces.

MEG: That's what's cool about getting older. Because then you face this whole thing about being old and that's not good either. But I want to go back to the breast thing Alice, cause the breast thing is very interesting. The sense of humiliation about the breast, each of us probably has some humiliation stories to tell about that. My music breast story is that I had an Italian teacher, a cello teacher, and he would take the cello and he would position it against my body in a way that men position it, which is about the boob level. So he would take the instrument and say: "It goes right there" and he'd smash your boobs with that thing. So now you are playing like this, OK? Because your boobs are on the way, and nobody, until later when I thought: "I am going to play this instrument the way the hell I feel it" which was to do what that little girl did, which is to shove your boobs on top, so the instrument is under, and now it becomes a part of me.

AV: Yeah! For support.

MEG: So you could take it in. But that sense of humiliation, I will never forget that teacher taking that... shoving my boobs with that cello. And all you can do is have like a baby hot flash when you are twelve.

AV: I remember at school, it was a voice class that I was taking. And I remember the teacher coming up to me and saying: "stand up straight" so I am standing straight as much as I can, and she said, "You are hollow here. Your chest has to come out" But you know what? That's how I am. But she come behind me and pulled my shoulders back and tried to make my chest look like hers and it just didn't look like hers. You know it's kind of sad.

MEG: The humiliation in both sides. If they are too big or are too small, all of it, all of it.

QF: So, where is the vindication? Where does the healing start for you?

MEG: When you put your boobs on the cello the way you want! That's where it starts.

AV: Yeah - and when you just don't care anymore and I wish there was a way to pass that on, that feeling like "you know what? This is my chest."

MEG: And it's a cool chest.

AV: And is a cool chest and I am happy with it and I'd like to see someone throw an orange or a dog biscuit at me today.

MEG: I'll hold them and you smack them.

AV: You don't have to hold them baby!

MEG: Just smack them anyway.

AV: Or do something like that to a friend. Because some of that stuff wasn't done to me, but just to witness it and to feel impotent and feel like, you know? You feel the girl's shame and you feel her embarrassment and humiliation and you can't do anything about it. And now, I think like you know. Like yesterday doing the conference, I just I felt like, I felt real solidarity with all the other women, the young and the older women. I felt like we were all connected and that we really had each other's back; and even though we don't always agree on everything, but you know? I felt like we have each other's back. We are all here for a common cause and let somebody try to disrespect us. I think we would all be...

MEG: You know talking about how you would feel today if that happened, as a woman, how you would intervene and protect that child and push the other one away, or smack them, or try to find the place for this to heal or bring it to light, but you would take the action, which is what we couldn't do when we were children. We couldn't take the action. The first time I remember really taking an action on behalf of another woman, physically, I was court interpreter, a single mother taking the bus home from downtown LA. I would park my car next to the bus stop because parking downtown was like twenty dollars or something. So on the way home, you know? I take the bus in and the bus back. So on the way home, you know? When you are surrounded by a lot of people, I think people in New York probably do this too, I don't look at people on the bus, I don't look. You don't stare because you don't want to trigger behaviors, right? I am at the back of the bus standing with that pole ready to get out when my stop comes and I am standing there. All the sudden the doors open for us to exit, and a little face comes up from the street. A woman, and she says

“ayudeme por favor” and there is a man who’s got his arm around her neck Alice, and I am already one step down into the well; girl I don’t know where this came from! I used to wear a backpack all the time. I got a hold of the... I took her arm, and took my foot and kicked him away, and I yanked her on the bus. I am not like a real kung fu lady, but I swear to God that was amazing... even to me. It scared the hell out of me after it happened. And once she was in I could see her neck was all red, she was crying, everybody staring at us. So we got off at the next stop, I took her in my car, I took her home. And it turns out she’s been living with an alcoholic husband, she is a garment worker and in the evenings when she comes home her drunk husband has got all these men in there and they are harassing her and she’s... it’s just this horrifying story. So I just told her, “You need to go to a shelter. I need to take you somewhere you can be safe.” So we did that. And I am just saying, I think that is the difference between being a little girl, and then later when you actually can take action. Because children are, their sense of power is so terrible. As adults... because they are so little and they can’t do it or they don’t know what to do. But they know something is really wrong. So as an adult you can smack some guy and yank the lady on the bus, right?

AV: It’s kind of sad because I have a very similar story to yours where I was driving and I saw woman and a man at the bus stop. And the man was actually beating her up and nobody was doing anything. I pulled the car over and I ran over to her. And I am like: “leave her alone” and she is like: “No, he is my husband, this is between us, he is my husband” She was telling me this. And I am like “ok, I’ll leave if you want me to, but I am gonna call the police” And then they are both yelling at me, and I just go back across the street, called the police and that’s it. That’s all I could do. But it was very depressing to see that she had...

MEG: Male-centered woman.

AV: She was just so far gone in this relationship that she thought it was, they had to play out, you know?

QF: Do you want to talk about Happy Accident?

AV: No, I don’t mind. Happy Accident is a song that I wrote that has to do with this dream that I used to have when I was growing up. My dad was very abusive, not to me but to my mom. And he would beat her. Like viciously beat her, and just leave her bleeding. And the police would come to our house once a month or something, and they’d threaten to take me out of the house, or put him in jail, and my mom just, you know? Put up with it basically. And as a kid I think I felt powerless, and I’d have this dream, this recurring dream that I walked into a room, I walked into my bedroom, and on my bed there is my father laying there, you know? All “chupado” looking like he is gonna die. And the windows are all draped and black. It’s very cinematic with like movie black taffeta curtains hanging on my window, and there is this old fashioned vanity with the round mirror and I look in it... and I am in there, but I am not me... well, when I am having this dream I’m maybe seven years old,

eight years old, and I am grown up and I look like cat woman. I am all dressed in black leather and I have a whip. I proceed to whip my father to death and I think this whole dream was just like I am killing my father, finally getting some kind of power. And I wrote this song. It's about a woman who shoots her husband and she is telling the story from her prison cell, and she is just saying I didn't know... I just basically... she'd had enough and she kills her husband and she then, even though she is in a prison cell, she feels like it was either this or die at his hands. So for me, I don't think I thought about any of that. Once I got in my teens I sort of stopped and then my father got sick and he wasn't strong enough to beat up my mother anymore... and I just kind of let all those memories go under and it wasn't until I wrote this song this is where this is coming out, this is where the art is healing me. And once I wrote it, all these other memories started coming back, and then I started, recently I started writing, and oh my god! And it's surprising because I don't remember very much about when I was a little kid, but when you start writing its like you have these movies in an archive in the back of your brain, and all comes back and its very healing. It's just when I was writing not just a song but when I was writing the book that I am working on or that I just wrote, it was like re-living it. I physically got sick. I was crying, I couldn't stop crying; I'd call my husband at work and said " I just wrote this page about my father" where he is... you know? He runs after my mother my mother comes running out the door and my father comes out running after her, and he has this look in his eye like he is a predator, and she is like this terrified animal running down the street. He goes after her and in his hand he has this belt and he has the buckle side hanging down. He catches up to her at the neighbor's house and he just starts clobbering her over the head with the belt buckle and you see blood coming down my mother's face, and then he gets her by the hair and drags her all the way down the street like a caveman basically, and I am this little kid trying to kick, trying to hit. I am just feeling impotent. So, as I was writing this story I was just physically just feeling like I am going to be sick. And now I can talk about it with you guys and just feel like, ok, it's just a story, but when I was... it's just the process of writing and of letting it go, and of telling somebody is just, it really is healing...

MEG: Your story Alice reminds me of Yolanda Broyles-González. You know is a women studies professor in Chicana scholar blablabla... I was at her house in Santa Barbara one time, and I was looking through her library and, you know? If I go to your house I am going to look at your books. And I was looking through her books and there is a book on colonialism and indigenous experience in the Americas that I pulled down and it reminds me, your story reminds me of there were formulas in colonialism of how they captured people and how they separated the genders. And I was fascinated by that, in a horrifying way. And what they would do is that they would capture a village for instance. They would separate the children from the adults often, maybe they would leave them with their mothers, but the men and women were totally segregated and the men would be flogged in public, and beaten and castrated, and the dogs would bite or whatever horrifying thing they did to the men was done in public, in full view of everyone; and the women would be beaten in private so that their screams and cries would not raise the passions of the men

because the men were impotent to help them. And some how, all of these old experiences it feels to me that they have imploded in each generation. We don't even know where this stuff comes from anymore, so the real horrifying behaviors in domestic violence, or violence that we see in women as well because we know that girls can also be really violent, we don't really know where these stuff comes from. This is like generational rage and behaviors that don't serve us anymore, but we just don't know that. That's why the book of Posttraumatic Slave Syndrome, by this African American psychologist when I heard her talking about how slave behaviors that people did to survive, we are still doing them and they don't serve us. Like the slave mother who has a ten year old son, and the slave master comes in and says "oh, little Johnny seems like is going to be a strapping young man" and mother immediately says "oh no, he is stupid, he is an idiot, he is good for nothing, he breaks everything, he eats too much, he's sloppy." What she is really doing, she is protecting him. But now the slave master is us, somehow. We've been taking that behavior in, and you know? Your story brought that to mind.

AV: Well it's funny that you said that, with the slave master because I think in a way, and I know I am going back to my own personal experience, but I feel like there was a point in my life that I just decided I'm not ever going to be my mother, I am not ever going to let anybody beat the shit out of me; and I thought the alternative is then to be my father and I think I got... for a while. I just feel like I was a very violent teenager. When I got older I would get in a lot of fights. I wouldn't take shit from people, and it took a while before I realized that both things... It wasn't that you had to be this or you have to be that.

MEG: Not an oppressor or oppressed because all you do is switch instead of finding there is a middle way or a different way.

AV: But I found myself and this is another thing that I hadn't realized until I wrote this thing, years later when I was a punk. I was in the Canterbury and I had this boyfriend that I had cheated on and he slapped me, and I am like "that's it, I am breaking up with you" and he came to my door, I had moved in with a girlfriend, he came to my door to apologize and guess what I did?

MEG: Slapped him back?

AV: No. I took my belt off and I hit him in the face. And I didn't connect the two things. You know? And I was like, you are going to hit me, I am going to hit you back. And I know because I've seen it, but I didn't think about it.

AV: By the 80's it was over. 77 to 80.

QF: So, in that time period you are doing this stuff, and you are engaged in a whole different scene, now from Robert Lewis Stevenson. There are some similarities in there but it is on for you. You've come out of your shell, and what are you doing during those years?

MEG: I've already gone through a period of great activism, Farm Worker's union, the undocumented... you know? I bunch of stuff that I was doing and then I take refuge in marriage. Stupid me... and had Octavio, my son. And now, I am a single mother. Proposition 13 has passed about then, and I might be off a little bit. But basically I couldn't get any work as a translator, which is what my straight job had been.

QF: Is that the..?

MEG: Yeah, it was around that time. Prop 13 passes and all the sudden there is no money anywhere. So in that period of time I am going back to school to become a court interpreter and trying to make ends meet. I joined a food co-op. And thinking that... Ok my life is anything that I have ever known before is over. The cello has been in the closet at this point for at least, I want to say almost a decade... oh yeah!! The cello, I told you, the cello has been abandoned over and over by me. That's how I know it's a long term relationship because you keep going back to it and is still there for you is even a miracle. So I think that's what was happening. I was struggling as a single mother. I think the Shah of Iran was falling around late 70's early 80's. So I became close friends with some Iranians, some activist Iranians, a family in particular. And they took me in; I can't explain how that happened. It was this cultural and friendship refuge that I had. So I was now gravitating to whoever would be nice to me and my son and whoever would give us refuge, that's where I was... culture and friendship. There weren't many people because what I was finding in music was that as soon as I went out to play with a group, now we gotta go on tour. But I couldn't do that. I had to go home, and wash clothes, do homework, take care of my kid and all of that; and I did it, but I have to say that I was resentful not of my son, but I was resentful of the circumstance. It pissed me off that I couldn't just grab my kid and run off somewhere because I didn't want to do that to him, it wasn't his fault for God's sake. We were actually talking to Martita last night. Martita and Quetzal's, Martita. And we were talking about that feeling when you have a child. If you have been making art and you don't have any support, or even if you have support all the sudden your life shifts to another world. You are responsible for other human being and they are the priority and that's all there is to it. But there is this lingering anxiety and feeling like "oh my god I can't make music!" I couldn't even bear to hear the cello. If you played cello for me I would start crying, I just couldn't even deal with it, I didn't wanna have any connection to it because it's too painful. So to answer your question, where were you in 78? I was like, you know? Trying to survive and then eventually, we were talking about the Troy scene, what years were those?

QF: That was maybe starting '89, '90?

MEG: So it was a while to then, I guess the ASCO people had invited me to do some performing with them, and that was another... it was a wonderful respite. It was at Self-Help Graphics. I went one night and Gronk had organized something and he said, oh play your cello. I thought I had to play my cello for a cause now, you know? I think that's really the Chola Con Cello, you know? That it's no longer the Pasadena

Symphony rehearsal or the march, it was like you know... and so the massacre had just happened in Sabra and Shatila. Where Palestinian refugee camps... people had been massacred. For some reason the Palestinian cause for a long period of time I felt it, I don't know if other people felt it as I did, but I felt it. So that night I played a piece called Oriental by Cesar Cui, which is very minor key, Arabic sounding piece. I remember I dedicated it to the people who had gone through this massacre. And that night I heard Marisela Norte read for the first time, and Mari read a poem about "La Chata, La Papa, La Loca, La Flaca" and I've never heard anybody read that kind of poetry. I was just beside myself; I thought I was going to leave. Apparently when I get real happy and excited I leave my body. I thought I was going to leave my body that night, and I thought, oh my god who is this! What is this?! So out of that friendship I start doing some performances with Mari. Very unplanned all of this stuff, real serendipity. Wasn't it that way though in those days? I don't think we had anything planned, it was just like we hung out. We saw each other, we got inspired by each other, and did stuff.

AV: Yeah, that's when you and I met, as far as I remember.

MEG: Yeah the Troy, absolutely.

QF: Can you describe a little bit what Troy is?

AV: Well... Troy... I met Sean Carillo in high school actually. We had a French class together.

MEG: No way!

AV: And then I fell out of touch with him and I had never met Bibby, but she was around at the Mask with Beck, right? And I didn't know them but one day I started working as a school teacher at Hoover Street Elementary School and this couple drove up and said "Hi Alice" and I looked at them and said "Hi" you guys look cool, I don't know who you are, but you look cool. And started talking and Sean said something in French, and I am like....!!

MEG: Oh my god, do I know you?

AV: Weren't we in French class together? And then we just became friends...again. They were in the process of starting this little café called Troy Café, downtown.

MEG: It was the Old LA Cafe before that.

AV: Ah, yeah, it was?

MEG: Yeah, and I was so glad that friends were taking it over. I was really happy.

AV: Yeah, and I started... I just started hanging out with them, and I was going through a period in my life where I didn't have, I don't think I had a band, a regular band, I didn't have a boyfriend. It was kind of like I had space, so I started going to Troy after work and just helping out. I'd put on an apron and washed some dishes...

MEG: I remember you would be behind the counter...!

AV: You know... make some coffee and I just started hanging out there all the time, and more and more people started coming in. Bibby and Sean knew a lot of people and they were really supportive of all the... you know...

MEG: Describe the space Alice.

AV: The space... ok. It was really tiny. It was an old brick building and there was enough room for the counter, a little like the refrigerator, and a little sink, and your coffee machine. And then on the other side where the customers came in, there was enough room for people to walk in and a single person table... and then at the very far... go ahead Maria.

MEG: So it's this long kind of hallwayish brick thing with the counter on one side, the tiny tables on the other. But at the end of the hallway or the space is the miracle, right? A little teeny weeny stage. It was like a postage stamp. It was tiny but it was fabulous; and then they had a garden outside. Do you remember the outside space? And they didn't charge parking so everybody and their mother could come, but everybody in that stage... I think it was their first time I saw Quetzal too. Quetzal was only one year old with his little... you were playing guitar, jarana?

QF: I was playing electric guitar.

AV: We called him Quetzalito. He was like the little Stevie Wonder of the Chicanos.

MEG: hahahaha!! So, a lot of the... Tenorio was there, I am pretty sure, yeah.

AV: Yeah. Tenorio started playing with us. How did we meet Tenorio?

QF: I met Tenorio.

AV: You brought him into the...

QF: No, he brought us into the Troy. He was playing with Jesse Nuñez, and Jesse knew Sean, and Jesse used to play there regularly with his original group and then it became the Santeria Devil Dogs, right?

MEG: Oh My God!

QF: So, ex-Brat members, that whole scene was basically starting to become...

MEG: Teresa.

AV: That's where I met Teresa too. I met Teresa and I met Marisela, I met Dayan Gamboa there, I met you, I met Quetzal...

MEG: Everybody cool was there.

AV: Any Chicano that was making art or music at that time was going to...

[Indecipherable]

MEG: ...Beck was a little kid with a skateboard. Do you remember he had a skateboard?

AV: I have a story. I don't know if I should say this.

QF: Tell us, tell us...

AV: Well, with the camera...

MEG: Tell us and we edit it later.

AV: So it was Angela, Teresa, and I formed a band called "Las Tres" and we started playing.

MEG: And Sean was a big supporter of you.

AV: Oh yeah. Sean and Bibby, big supporters. And this record producer came in, and he is like "You know what? I want to do a record with some of these Troy bands and Bibby Hanson... Oh, let me look at these contracts," and she is like: "Beck should be in here, he's played at Troy" And the guys says: "Beck? No he is not a Chicano, he doesn't fit this thing" he is like "No deal, I don't want Beck in here." I bet he's kicking himself now!! Hahaha!!

MEG: I know, can you imagine?

QF: It's possible that Beck wouldn't have become what he's become, even for the better.

AV: I really doubt that he wouldn't have become a big star.

MEG: I remember the first time I had a real conversation with Bibby. She always wore that blond hair, the lipstick, and always look... you know? really nice. She looked at me and she said "My mother was a gypsy" and I thought "Oh shit, this girl is the real shit here! you know?" hahaha.

AV: Bibby... we used to do this. We used to do real stupid stuff because we spent long periods of time with nothing to do at Troy, and so, we made slam books and we passed this... and one of them was "who has the biggest dick at Troy?" You came in second... hahahah!! Bibby came in first!!!

[Everybody laughing.]

AV: And I am like "Oh my God poor Bibby, look what they are saying about you. "That's good, that means I have power that means that I am perceived as a strong woman" and I am like "hey, she's right," I didn't think of it that way!

AV: Bibby Hanson is Beck's mom, and she was the owner or part owner of Troy Café. And she is just an amazing really strong woman, really, just very inspiring also.

MEG: ...very clear about who she was and who you were and no apologies, no bullshit, real straight up. I like that about her.

QF: She comes from that New York scene.

AV: She was a factory girl. But she's so much more than that.

QF: Yeah...

AV: It's funny because she is such, such a strong woman and I think sometimes I just said she is Beck's mom. But I think a lot of times you say... Ok, her father was a famous artist. He's a Fluxus artist "Al" Hansen and then her son is really famous. So, she is often defined by these two men in her life, but she is such a power house that I think she was probably like the sun that they revolved around, that she was really...

MEG: It was an open space for all of us. I remember that it was one of the few places that it was like home. I felt very comfortable there, in part because there were so many Chicanos there. I don't think I have been into a Chicano coffee house per say, so going there and seeing everyone just felt like; Oh, I am home, this is. I am supposed to be here, this is a good thing, and started seeing other talent around you. At some point you guys were kind enough to invite me to perform with you a few times, so I had chances to do stuff that I wouldn't have had other wise. And I brought other music there. And worked with Alison Picker, I did a couple of evenings there of all the Chilean revolutionary, Chilean songs of Victor Jara that I hadn't been playing for a while. So it was a real eclectic mix.

AV: Yeah, it was.

MEG: But your politics wasn't gonna get you thrown out of there. If you had radical politics that wasn't... you were invited, you were welcome. Your music was different, odd, whatever you were experimenting, cool, everything, I mean it was a good space; it really was a good space.

QF: That to me is the key. The difference between what that space was and anything that I'd seen, because I was kind of young, but before that I couldn't really speak to that. But after that, any so called Chicano or Latino coffee house. What set Troy apart was that progressive vibe. It was not just a Chicano coffee house; it was a progressive Chicano coffee house.

MEG: It wasn't just artsy fartsy. It had some politics. You could have politics in there.

QF: Not just politics... I mean yeah, how politics play into art and with how are you doing art; You couldn't just come with some bullshit there.

MEG: No fluff.

QF: You had to put your time into it. And I remember the first time we played there as a group Aztlan. There is a bunch of stuff on YouTube that I have. You guys should look "Aztlan at Troy" and you will see me, Tenorio, and Marco, and all those cats. We are all on stage and I remember the first time we played there. It was Diane and Linda and Marisela were in one of the round tables in the front, like little vultures...

MEG: Dressed in black with lipstick.

QF: Ready to eat us alive!!

MEG: Lucky you!

AV: They were looking at you because you were cute. C'mon.

MEG: Everybody was cute. I just thought everybody was so attractive. Everybody would have their own style. Their way of looking and I am not that visual of a person until fairly recently... so I never used to get that... I was like, how do they do that?

AV: Everybody was cute because everybody was smart.

MEG: Because everybody was two years old. That was the other reason we were cute too...

QF: Were you there at the curfew parties?

AV: The curfew parties?

MEG: We missed out on that...

QF: When the National Guard was...

MEG: Oh my God!

AV: My ex-husband was there...

MEG: I think I might have dropped in toward... right at the end of all that. 'Cause I was living at Echo Park, so I was fairly close. I may have dropped in towards the end but I don't think I was actually there for the night or for the curfew.

QF: They used to have curfew parties...

MEG: That was after Rodney King, right? That's '91...

QF: After Rodney King... The National Guard came in and occupied...

MEG: The entire Downtown LA.

MEG: Talk about a war zone, ah? Two, three hundred fires in the city...

AV: Yeah, I remember that night... how could you ever forget?

QF: Talk about that...

MEG: About Rodney King?

QF: Just the time, about your experience.

MEG: Yeah, Chola Con Cello was absolutely born right after that, and the women's the old women's building on Spring Street. Osco had a... Osco to night. Whoever they invited, because there was no grant, there was no publicity agent, it was just a rave you know. Everybody and their mother came. The place was so packed that you couldn't even get in. I don't know how people told each other. This is something about having a whole network of young people who are involved in something and tell others and they all come. It was an amazing, it was that kind of an evening, and I was already on the county school board. God forbid, I was a Molina appointee... don't ask, I am not on the barbeque list. It happened because of Jackie Goldberg... she... because I was an activist, blablabla. So I was on the county school board in the day and at night I was wearing big giant wigs and ratted. To me, I looked like a weird sailor or something, and she had drawn stuff on my arm and I had this big hair. And that was the first time I did Chola Con Cello. My son videoed it, and what I did is; you know that Bob Dylan video where he is singing a song and holding up papers where he is saying "I love you", "Come Back Tomorrow" whatever he is saying. So I got that and I thought I am gonna do that. So I got the sound of a helicopter, and then I was holding up big pieces of paper that had statistics on the undocumented. And then after that I played a piece of a box suite, go figure! I mean, it was a performance art night, anything goes. But somebody from the Taper was there that night, Josefina... I can't remember her last name I am so sorry... Ramirez! And right after that she invited a number of performances to the Taper, but they wanted, the dramaturge, and directed, good lights and blabla bla. But it was really born out of that. And the

reason why I made that performance was because sitting on the school board already Pete Wilson was asking questions like, how many of your students at the County are undocumented, or illegal aliens! And I am like, Oh my God!! This is what you have been working on since you were nineteen years old, so this is like, I can't not respond to that. So I guess this is the first time I responded to it in art.

AV: Yeah.

MEG: And what an amazing feeling that is. What I just described seemed like a real disjointed evening. But it had its moment. For me it was the birth of taking my voice back as an artist, as a mature woman. And the politics in the art for the first time were like all one thing, and this is what it is. And there was a punk feeling to it, even though I wasn't in the punk movement. This feeling of, this is what it is, the sense of truth telling in your own way. So I never experienced that that way. My whole experience in the classical music was extremely racist and repressive. I was often the only person of color where I went. Myself and Ronnie Cooper, African American cellist, we were in high school, the only people of color in the cello section. And it was brutal, there was nothing short of brutal, and I didn't have a stage mommy who could afford the time and watch and make sure I was safe and all that. So I had to put up with a bunch of adult racist crap when I was a child. Or like I'd be in these honors orchestras. Like there were a few young people who were in the Pasadena Symphony, maybe five of us. The kid next to me, his father was a neurosurgeon who sent him to Paris to study scales in the summer... haaaa!! You know?? My mother had to take a second job to buy me the cello that I still have today. So the class question was just incredibly... in classical music what almost destroyed me or made me so happy to run to the Chicano movement and sort of give the finger to classical music big time, was like "Fuck you, I don't need to be hearing all this crap." Here is this whole movement that I am a part of that speaks for me. And also you idealize the movement which has a lot of its own problems, but there is a moment in which you take refuge with just incredible glee, I don't think glee is the right word, I don't know you just feel like it's a transformative moment for you at a lot of different levels. Classical music to this day is elitist and it is only becoming better because of the movement in Venezuela. The Children's Orchestra Movement.

AV: I am not familiar with that...

MEG: They have a system called "El Sistema" so what they've done over twenty five years, is created children's orchestras in every town, and the more at risk the neighborhood is that's where the orchestra belongs.

AV: Which is just the opposite of here! Your kids are doing really poorly; let's take out music and art.

MEG: Exactly... give ourselves a lobotomy... a cultural lobotomy. So these kids become the center of the town's focus. When they have an event, a cultural event, or a saints event or anything, the children are at the center, the orchestra is at the

center, and then from those baby orchestras they create a National Youth Orchestra called Simon Bolivar. And this movement is just transformational, why? Because these kids now they go to rehearsals twice a week and then they have a lesson. Their whole life is about music. That's what it's about. So you have kids living in favelas in really poor barrios, and you see them with their little violins, walking over, I mean, I'm exaggerating, but walking over dead bodies, and madness and whatever is going on in the neighborhood, the violence and all that. And that's what we need, it's just beginning in LA around Gustavo Dudamel but there is still this very elitist halo around him, sort of the Ladies of the Philharmonic... I am sure I'll burn in hell for saying this, but fuck it.

AV: I'll meet you there... I'll meet you there. I'll bring the carne asada.

AV: I'm vegetarian right now.

MEG: All right - very cool.

AV: I've been for a few years.

MEG: Very good.

AV: I'm a reluctant.

MEG: Will you attack a taco truck every once in a while?

AV: No

MEG: Taco de Papa

AV: Yeah. No I'm only vegetarian cause I'm too lazy. My daughter's vegetarian. I'm too lazy to make two dinners.

MEG: Did you become aware of food justice issues at some point. And um...

AV: Yeah. It does...

MEG: How did it happen for you Alice?

AV: My daughter. My teenage daughter is a member of PETA and she just made me watch stuff on how animals are treated. It makes it really hard to enjoy certain foods.

MEG: Oh yeah.

AV: So that's one of the reasons.

MEG: Chew on that crispy bacon any more.

AV: Well I can still remember what it tastes like... ha ha ha

MEG: Now we gotta do the baco-bits.

AV: Anyway - my experience with the Rodney King Riots. I was at school. I know we don't call it the Rodney King Riots anymore, but we did for so long, it kind of stuck with me. But I was at school and - we were ah... we were watching. Well I was teaching pre-K. Oh no, I take that back. I was thinking of the O.J. Simpson trial.

MEG: Oh - one of those trials.

AV: Because that one was also really, it was very explosive at school. But I was teaching at Hoover. And um, I was teaching when you know the violence broke out. And they had an early release, and they had us call the parents and say come pick up your kids. And they couldn't get a hold of some of the parents. And they're like, you know, "people are being attacked, we want all the kids to go home." So I ended up driving a couple of kids home. And then I... you know I'm not gonna stay.. I grew up in East LA, I'm not going to like lock myself up in the house. So, I had a recording session to go to. I was recording with Tito Larriva in Hollywood. So I went. And we were recording when all the sudden we hear like, you know, fire engines going down... a building down the street is on fire. And, we're like... maybe we should call off the session and go home. So I'm driving down Santa Monica Blvd. and people are literally getting out of cars, throwing stuff, you know, like just looting. Going absolutely crazy. Santa Monica, you know they broke into that... right by where we were they were like breaking into buildings. And throwing trash cans through windows. It was outrageous, just outrageous. I got home and was watching the TV, watching all the fires all over the place. And my family from Mexico is calling me up. You know "is everyone alright?" "Yes, everyone's all right." You know and I'm thinking.. hmm... where's my husband? So I think I got a call from Troy saying that he was at the police station, picketing out there. And I was thinking.. I gotta figure out whether I'm going to go bail this guy out or not.

MEG: You were talking about how you were watching TV. So you were watching the news?

AV: I was watching the news.

MEG: But I remember. I was on the School Board then for sure. On that County School Board. I was watching TV in Spanish too. Because I was concerned about the Spanish-speaking parents. Guess what they were showing? Novelas. They were showing novelas right at the moment of the riots. So senoras were taking their children who were only watching TV in Spanish and putting you know.. braiding their little hair and washing their cute little faces, and setting them out into the riots 'cause they didn't really get from the media how incredibly dangerous this was.

Because I was on the County School Board, I called that Superintendent and I told him. You call that TV station right now. KMEX... so what, you know. And you tell them that what they are doing is putting our community in danger. He was really reluctant to do it, but I pushed and bitched until he did it. So then they came and they... now they were going to get a helicopter and they were going to fix it and all that stuff. But they were showing novelas during the riot! It was outrageous! Just, you know, um... the disparity between the two medias is always kind of interesting to me. There's good and bad on both sides. A lot of bad on both sides too of course. But sometimes, like if you want to hear news about Latin America, I gotta go to KMEX or Al Jazeera now. That's really where I get my news. But, the making... the dumbing down of communities with this inane programing has literally put them in danger in the past. Not to speak of long term danger or this idea of giving people a lobotomy with this stuff. It's just outrageous.

MEG: Death of Chicana?

QF: Teatro Chicana.

MEG: Oh... yes. I have read it. Tell me what you think. I really want to know.

QF: Well as testimonios. I loved it. I thought it was amazing. And just the... that's what I took it for. These testimonios of that time period you know, and what they went through. It was incredible. What they are now that's something different. But, you said something about community. I wanted to ask you, at what point did you both realize... Okay how can I ask this? I'm going to throw out a term and you just respond to it okay? Community artists, or community musicians, what does that mean? 'Cause for me, I found myself at a point in my career where, I was on the fence, looking at both sides and I had to choose.

MEG: Yes.

QF: Clearly had to make a choice and was told by a record executive "if you want to make it in this business you need to leave your community behind you."

MEG: Oh God yeah. I've heard that before.

QF: "You need to like... listen to this, I'm telling you the truth right now... there's no way around this. You either choose the access and leave your community behind or you stay with your community and you'll never make it."

MEG: And be downwardly mobile.

AV: I think you have to make a choice. You have to decide what is my definition of success. And if your definition of success is making a lot of money, then you are making the wrong choice Quetzal.

QF: No - it's mainly to you... do you remember that moment - or making that choice?

AV: I've never had to make that choice, because I've never really had, I never felt like someone's going to give me a contract and I'm going to be the next Lady Gaga... and I have to say "whoa, if I had the opportunity to be the next Lady Gaga or be who I am, be true to myself, what would I do?" It's so unrealistic for me to imagine myself giving up millions of dollars that I don't really... I can't even imagine having to make that choice. So the only choice I have is "am I going to tell the truth in my music and in who I am, or am I going to join the millions of people at the bottom trying to claw their way up by being something that they're not?" You know. And...

MEG: Giving up your voice.

AV: And giving up your voice. Yeah exactly, because really a lot of artists that are good artists end up becoming packages for goods that are being sold. You know they end up losing their voice, and becoming just the vehicle for a T-shirt or a brand of jeans, or a perfume. And I would never want to do that, no matter how much money I make. So, I've never even entertained that. But as far as what you are saying about being a community artist. I don't know. What you do is different. You really have to be in touch with your community. And I think being in touch in a much more personal way than somebody who's up playing.. you know a concert pianist or something, that is in touch in a different way. You thrive on that interaction. It's different depending on what kind of music you are making, I think.

QF: Yes - but what does that mean to you? When I say community art or community music, what does it mean to you? What is your engagement?

AV: To me it just means somebody who is interested in interacting, reflecting, and giving a voice to their community. And being a part of it.

MEG: I probably had, because of the instrument, a number of opportunities to go through that door. And they were mediocre at best. I never thought they were like... And even if they had been, I feel like you do Alice, I would have never sold my voice down the river. When Chola Con Cello first hit the big stage and did the Taper... After that night I described at the Women's building. Pee Wee Herman's manager came up to me. He had seen the performance and he said to me he really liked Chola Con Cello and he had an idea for it. He wanted to spin it into a sitcom. So I met with him a week later. And I was really leery of him, because I had already been around classical music. I know about fast talking people. I'm already a single mom, so I can smell some shit a mile away. But, you know, I wanna see what the guy has to say. So his idea was basically to neuter my work. No politics. He says "she's great, I love the way she looks, love the way she plays the cello. Here's my idea... she should be married to a white man... she should work in the courts (because that's what I did anyway), and she should play the cello, they should have three kids. No politics, because that's going to be poison..." And I said "well I'm sorry then we can't do it, because that's what this is about... this is about that." And in fact it is agit prop. To

some of the Mexicano artists that I would meet later, even some of those that would call themselves community artists, or come from that tradition, this idea of doing agitation propaganda art was horrifying. They have a name for, and I can't remember the name, but they would constantly say it: "Oh you are doing that thing, you're doing that thing." And I'm like, what do you mean I'm doing that thing? I'm just doing what I do you know. But there was this put-down around that. So I think giving up the elitism part for me was a sense of liberation. It wasn't a second thought at all it was like "yes! I'm not in that." And once Chola Con Cello started, the Pee Wee Herman guy showed up, I started doing some stand-up, and somebody saw us in San Antonio... I was the headliner person... And I'm not really a stand-up comedian because I don't like the environment. It's too weird. That green room. A lot of the comics, what I saw was because a lot of people are not trained in anything, they are just doing it innately. And so how they get ready is that they get loaded. That's really how they get ready. They either drink, or smoke, or do whatever, and that's you know... And I walked in, since I was creating a sort of performance, I showed up with a cello and a wig. Girl! I triggered some sister who lost her mind. She did not take her meds that day. She goes: "Who the fuck is that bitch with the wig?" And I went "Oh... no... I'm gonna die now." I ran to the toilet and stayed there till it was my turn to come out.

AV: You're kidding!

MEG: No, because she was violent, and I could see it. I'd worked in the courts long enough to see when trouble was coming that way. It's not that I didn't have it in me, but c'mon I got a wig and a cello, and I'm not gonna slap her with the cello you know. So I went into the bathroom and I waited until it was my turn so i could go out and do what I had to do. And what that green room is in essence is... If you are coming from Chicano... traditional Chicano theatre, even if you weren't in it, you kinda know what it's about. Before you go on stage, everybody gets together, they hold hands, they burn sage, sing Kumbayah. They may still be shitty to each other, but at least there's a pretense of being a collaboration. In stand up comedy it's ruthless. In the green room, the job of everybody in there is to fuck you up so that by the time you get out on the stage you're all freaked out. So of course in my case, the immediate thing is like "she's fat, what's that fuckin' instrument, blah da da" and that kept happening to me over and over again. So I, in order to do whatever I did in stand up comedy... I had to actually.. "okay, I'll do it, but you gotta give me a room, and I don't want to talk to anybody at all. I don't want to see anybody, I don't want to talk to anybody, until it's my turn to come on." And that stayed with me I think from those early experiences being... Later in San Antonio, I would be with a bunch of stand up women... little... leather, you know like that. Venezuela B Novela women. Really this is nothing against Venezuela, they were like reinas de las peliculas "B" you know. And these were all stand-up comedians and they had little formulas. Joke, set-up, punch. Joke, set-up, punch. I mean it was this real formulaic stuff that they did. And I was doing like, I don't know, I was bitching at the governor, and playing the cello, and showing atrocity on the film. I was doing all kinds of weird stuff. But what they do, that's exactly what they would do... the minute they would see you, they would

look at you and they'd go "well this is Maria Elena and she's the headliner" well they didn't know you from their circle so they would go "everybody in San Antonio is so faaat.." and the word would go on for like three days "faaaaat" it just didn't end. And you're like "okay here we go." Here we go! So, a very interesting thing though is... if you can own your body, whatever your body is. We would go into the room and we would fix ourselves. Girl! I'd be sittin' there, pointing my chi chi's and you know putting the lip stick on and fixing my hair. And here's these really attractive women, and all of the sudden they were like, I could see it in the mirror, they got unnerved by that. And I just thought, "oh this is the ultimate revenge." So Pepsi offers us a tour after that and I turned it down. I said "if I have to work with these vicious, horrifying women, something bad's gonna happen, and I can't perform in that environment." So I turned it down. And shortly after that, and invitation to do "Chuck and Buck," which I thought was a porno film, it sounded nasty. It was by the guy who did "Star Maps" or something like that. And he calls me up and he says "oh Maria Elena Gaitan... you were the ball... you know how people calling, kiss all over the place, you know it's like "okay, what's the bull shit."

AV: I like to call them "fluffers."

MEG: Oh, there you go, there you go. They fluff you up. And this guy's saying "I have a fabulous part for you, we were thinking about you, so we wrote it with you in mind. I've seen you perform, blah blah blah." And I said "so what is it... I'm a maid?" Girl! I heard silence on the other side!

AV: Oh my God!

MEG: And I tell him, "you know what, there's enough other people who do maids, I don't need to be your maid. My mother did not send me to no peachy music school to be your maid." He goes "no, but you could be like Hazel." Remember Hazel? The bossy maid. Ha ha ha ha. You could be the Chicana version of Hazel. I mean what am I going to do, get a viola and start smacking people around? I was just like...

AV: Chaca...

MEG: Yeah a chaca and start flinging it around. It was just crazy! And then finally, the final one was "Mi Familia." I tried out for the part of one of the family members. But I'm not an actor in front of the camera. I don't do that. So if you don't... they were looking for somebody with a name and all that. So, I didn't get the part. And that was okay. And then in the end, the guy calls me back, and he says "we have another... it's just a cameo... but you're gonna.. it's so fun... it's a lot of fun!" You know what it was? A fat lady walking down the street and a kid takes a bow and arrow and hits her in the ass. I said "okay... ah, I'm not doing that alright." And then, one Madonna video. The one from "Evita." And the MTV video was... you see an Asian, young woman, playing the cello, and she's got this beautiful gown... next to the piano. Well I was invited to play that. But, I thought Evita was disgusting and I didn't want to be part of that, and the young person who called me up was one of

those fast-talking Hollywood ones. And the first thing he said was "I'm calling on behalf of this Madonna video, and you've been recommended... we are looking for a Latina who can play the cello, and I think you're the one..." And then he goes "I gotta ask you a question... are you pretty?" And I said "well do you have a large penis?"

AV: Did you say that?

MEG: Straight up. It just came out girl. See, I do have punker tendencies. And so the guy just lost his Hollywood fluff shit. And I go "you know you do not call me and ask me... you can ask me for a head shot, you can do all that stuff, but you don't ask me that question. I think I'm fabulous... but who are you! Who are you who's asking this question?" So apparently I fucked it up a number of times, to the point where one of my more successful visual artist friends said "Maria Elena, you should just go in there and do stand-up with the titty queens. What the hell. Just be yourself." And I said "I can't do that. I'm going to be touring with these women to eight cities and somewhere down the line there's going to be one of those..." Who was that girls who was a ice skater and the other one came a whacked her knee?

AV: Tonya Harding.

MEG: There you go... we were going to have a "Tonya Hardian" and I was going to be the woman who got her knees knocked out. So I was not going to go there. So, anyway, that's the end of my stories about the possibilities of becoming famous or infamous and turning them down, and not feeling anything about it. Like regret of any sort at all.

AV: Of course not.

MEG: Even if a so-called friend will tell you "oh you are being downwardly mobile." That's the first time someone called me downwardly... he said "well you're just rejecting all these opportunities." Opportunities for what? To bend over a kiss myself on the ass? Are you crazy! See, I do have punker tendencies.

[Hug]

AV: You are my new love.

MEG: I love you too Alice.

AV: I love that you didn't let somebody shoot an arrow at your ass.

MEG: I know! Really, can you imagine for posterity... your grandchildren will say "oh my grandma was in a movie... they shot an arrow in her ass..." hahahaha.

QF: I remember that scene.

MEG: Yeah... it was just very awful. And the way that people approach you with this lie. This ball-face lie to tell you this is a fabulous cameo and it's all the opposite. It's demeaning, disgusting, and then you're just supposed to get all excited. You know what's really sad though Alice? Watching your peers take the part and really pretend that they are happy about it. And be excited.

AV: I've fallen... I've been talked into things that I realized afterwards... I should have seen through. I'm a little bit gullible sometimes.

MEG: Well sometimes we just don't know, you know?

AV: Yeah.

MEG: Or we think we're tough enough.

AV: When everybody's telling you how fabulous you are it's kinda hard to... no... wait, maybe they're after something. No. I must really be fabulous.

MEG: That's right.

AV: That is. I am really fabulous.

MEG: Well you are really fabulous, but then they have their agenda.

AV: Yeah. And then you find out half way through it, and you're like "they're just trying to get me to do this thing for their..." Of course.

MEG: For their thing.

AV: Yeah.

QF: Speaking of fabulous. I want you to talk about, if you don't mind, your fabulous concept of Cholita.

AV: Oh.. Cholita. Well I can't take full credit for it. I'm just a little tiny contributor to that. But that was Miss Vaginal Cream Davis.

MEG: Oh my God! I remember that.

AV: The genius that is Miss Vaginal Cream Davis. Vaginal is, for those of you who don't know who Vaginal is. She is, I don't know how tall she is.

MEG: Six foot.

AV: Six foot, eight. Black drag queen. Beautiful, just beautiful and truth telling woman, who took her character... made something... she's named after Angela Davis and vaginal cream so.... hahahaha.

MEG: Oh God.... hahaha. And disrespectful to everybody! hahaha

AV: But she actually had a band together called the "Afro Sisters" first. And the Afro Sisters, we just... it was sort of a performance group. We'd get up and we'd talk about being Black.... and ah...

MEG: hahahaha I love it! I love it!

AV: And she would make up a song and we'd join in and it was just all improvised humor and music. And that evolved into Cholita. And I still to this day do not know if she really is part Mexican, but she told me that she was.

MEG: If not, she's got big tendencies.

AV: She's got Mexican tendencies. So we have... Cholita was supposed to be a female Menudo. Except that we were all in our 40s at the time. But we played pre-pubescent girls that were in a teen pop group, and we were a Latin sensation from South America, and we were touring the United States. And we just had the best songs too. We had these great big... well sometimes we wore great big wigs and other times we just did our own hair. And then we had costumes.

MEG: Space suits.

AV: Space suits... yeah! That was one of them, and Japanese Shibuya area school-girl outfits that were... they were like school girl outfits but they were an explosion of day glow.

MEG: Oh my God, I love it!

AV: And our songs were like. One of them was "Size has Nothing to do with Performance" that was inspired by you, Quetzal. hahaha. No, not really. Another one was "Beans Are Not Enough." And... "Este es de la Mujer"... I mean the songs were just really... truth-telling songs with humor.

QF: I'm not a puta, I'm a princess.

AV: "I'm not a Puta, I'm a Princess". One of our lines.. just to give you a little taste of Cholita.. one of them "Beans Are Not Enough" says: "back in the USA you eat sushi and pizza, sprouted grains and whole wheat buns, but in the fifth world children are starving, they are eating beans and constantly farting..." so... it was truth-telling with a sense of humor.

MEG: That's funny Alice. We need to revive those songs now.

AV: They were good songs.

MEG: Absolutely.

QF: "Tu Madre" was another one.

AV: "Chinga Tu Madre" was our hit song. "Chinga tu, chinga tu, chinga tu madre..." I mean I really have to sing it.... "Chinga tu, chinga tu, chinga tu madre... chinga tu, chinga tu, chinga tu padre... chinga me, no chinga you! chinga chingale... I hate your whole familyyy... I hate your fuckin' family treeeee..." And then there was... "I'm not a puta, I'm a princess, like the immortal Vickie Carr...

MEG: hahaha... the immortal Vickie Carr... Oh my... brilliant songs, I swear.

AV: They had good songs. And Ms. Davis is just a genius. Everything she did on stage was just hilarious.

MEG: A combination of brilliance and outrage.

AV: Yeah!

MEG: Wasn't it? I mean, it was like...

AV: Oh... one time, in the Afro Sisters, we played this place downtown and there were some black militant guys in the audience that just were gonna kill us. They thought that we were mocking them... when it's like, you know, we're like trying to... I mean I don't know, maybe we were out of line?

MEG: We were deconstructing everything. How about that?

AV: Yeah. But they were insulted and we went out the fire escape.

MEG: But you know, I think the Left has that problem... in the political Left... basically it was like: meeting, meeting, meeting, demonstration, "oh yeah - where's that person who can sing that song? You, come over here, get that guitar and get up here and you draw a picture." So the art isn't how they make the change - the art is sort of worn like a cuff link or a tie. And there's a lot of... They've done the same thing with spirituality also... The spirituality is not a Left Wing discussion. That's why it's become a Right Wing discussion. So I found in movement stuff, I didn't feel like the cello belonged there because of all the racism I had experienced in that world. But in fact if it had been a more neutral world and I had just wanted to bring my cello in, I couldn't have done it either. I was actually suspected of being a cop, because they'd "look at her... look how she dresses... and that thing... "la shello"..." so "la

shello" was very suspect, even if it had a Viva la Raza! sticker on the case, or "Boycott Grapes!" you know.

AV: I like the way you used to say that you wore a costume to work.

MEG: Yeah. I still do.

AV: But this is the real me, but I wear a costume to work.

MEG: Yeah, to work I wear a costume and a mask. I still wear a costume. I have black pants and some kind of a decent blouse, and that's it. That's what I wear and don't ask me to... power suits, you don't pay me enough for that shit, so if you want me to wear a power suit you are gonna hav'ta triple my salary. I'm.. just, are you crazy, you know.... Chinga tu, chinga tu...

QF: I have those recordings.

MEG: No you don't!

QF: Yeah, I do.

AV: They're fun! They are fun songs.

MEG: We're lucky nobody killed Alice. Jesus Christ! Shit! God damn!

QF: That period was hilarious. That was amazing. That whole time period.

MEG: There was no sense of humor though from activists, you know you go in there, you see that shit, you're like...

QF: Especially coming from women who get it, or queer people.

MEG: Oh yeah - there is an element of misogyny in that absolutely. Absolutely.

QF: Well the League, the League had a stance against, maybe the CP did too, but against queers.

MEG: Oh, absolutely, it came from the top. It was a form of illness.

QF: Yep. Exactly.

MEG: It was a form of illness - and it was decadent.

QF: Like they were derelicts or... they used a word like that.

MEG: Yeah - decadent and ill. Until Angela [Davis] became gay. And came out, then that tore everything apart.

QF: Yeah.

MEG: Your camera's off right?

AM: No, it's still rolling. You want me to take that part out, or?

MEG: No, no, no.

QF: You wanna tell the truth?

MEG: Well, there's some things that probably shouldn't be spoken about now, until me and my son are both gone. You know? We are living in such a repressive time that some conversations... you are just hesitant to have them because you know that you will find a dead burro in your bed.

QF: Yeah. I mean one thing I don't hesitate to do, is to dispel idol worship. So like talking about Cesar Chavez for example. You know, let's sign this... Let's get Cesar Chavez day, or a stamp... and I'm like "hell no! let's have a farmworkers day!" You know, I'm not going to go idol worship somebody who was ultra conservative and a political player.

MEG: Well yes... and who stood in the way of the immigrants rights movement, which is where I had to make the choice and leave.

QF: He used to call immigration on workers who would not strike - that were in the fields.

MEG: And Delores was lobbying in Washington D.C. the same summer that Burt sent me as a kid to lobby, and then come to find out... I told you when I was first working at La Casa, when it first opened... not later when all of that madness was happening. I wasn't part of that, but I pretty much gave up school to go work with Burt, and so he sent me to D.C. to lobby. And Delores had just been there to pass the, I think it was the Kennedy-Rodino bill, and it was the first bill that was going to make employers pay a fine for hiring undocumented workers, so I was there to lobby against it. Came to find out that Delores had actually been there to promote that. She was close to the Kennedys and Delores has done amazing things in her life and this is not any kind of put down, but in fact the Union made a lot of mistakes. And I think what you are talking about, not idol worshiping and knowing that people are just human being is just really important. Because if we create movements around the fallibility of human beings, we are fucked. I mean we just... it's not gonna take you very long. And a lot of my heroes are tarnished. I'm, all of us in a way, I think are just human beings. But when you are young person and your heroes do bad things, man! that blows your mind. It just blows your mind. I think that's why I ran

off and got married too. It's like, I don't want to be in this anymore, I don't know what this is... you can't trust it, people get hurt, you know. So yeah, talking about that or some of the other Chicano leaders who you saw up close and not so nice. Not so nice. Having sex with little girls and basically pederasty... a lot of violence towards women. The threat of rape and death, which is something I experienced too, even with the famous Brown Buffalo... I think I told you this story Quetzal. So being close to the famous people was also very scary, because if you're 19 years old and you are just very passionate... it reminded me of that little girl we were watching dance yesterday. You know how passionate she is, and she's entrega - you know she gives herself over to this moment of dancing... You can do that in other places, and the Tarima is kind of a metaphor for how you can be that passionate and be in your body... I feel like I did that maybe in political work. Totally gave myself over to everything that we had. My mother's home... if I had to feed people... my car... whatever I had was at the disposal of the movement. And then to have the men, mostly, men leaders, you know, betray that, or to see these really terrible acts of violence against women. And including against myself. And these are not stories you feel like telling easily because you feel like you're gonna betray that, that you were a part of. And there is still that issue for me. It's hard for me to talk about it. But I still think at some point I need to tell these stories. Every time I see Oscar Acosta aggrandized by academics who wanna just look at his two little books and go "oh wasn't he fabulous!" No, he wasn't fabulous, he was actually a fucking sociopath. And he beat the shit out of his wife Socorro and made her suffer. Lived off of her credit cards. You know, and if you didn't tow the line he'd get paranoid. Literally, paranoid. And if you didn't do what he said, he'd say you were a cop and sic some real mean decatos to kill you. Which is what happened to me. So it's crazy. The only reason I got saved from that is because they were having a conversation apparently in Oscar's house one night about how Maria Elena was a cop... the cello player was a cop, and everybody was getting all paranoid, and um, you know blah blah blah... and getting high too at the same time. Which helps a lot! And one of the guys who was there. his sister was my mother's student teacher in Hollenbeck. He said "Maria Elena's not a cop. Her mom was a teacher at Lincoln during the walk-outs. It's my sister's master teacher. Maria Elena's just like... you know, she's one of us." If it hadn't been for Brother Benny Luna, I would not be here today. I'm pretty sure, because these guys would have done that. I'm pretty sure. Yeah, so the disenchantment with the politics really goes to that question that you're talking about Quetzal about not making gods out of leaders, because we are all so fallible.

QF: Yeah.

MEG: You know, look what happened, even in South Africa when Winnie Mandela... when they got a divorce. Oh my God, you're heart broken. You loved her. Because you what part of it is that we need heroes. We need somebody to look up to. And so, I think what it is, it's a journey to help people understand that the person you really have to look up to is to yourself. And to your community. That's where the heroism is, and it isn't necessarily outside. Maybe it's your tia who is making ends meat, or keeping the family together or the common ordinary things. Not the big sexy things

in front of a camera even. But we all have been taught that this (clapping her hands) is what it means to be an artist. It's for applause. El tricinero de los aplauses yeah? The first couple of times that I did big stage stuff. I made it a point to do something to put me back in my body. To go away with friends, be by myself, do something ordinary, go home and make soup. Something where I wasn't gonna let that evening of this (clapping) puff up my head and drive me nuts... you know, and make me crazy that way. So, I have a saying now "we are all just a flea on the ass of a cosmic dog" and you need to get over yourself. Hahaha.... "We are all just a flea on the ass of a cosmic dog."

AV: Las Tres was the result of being at Troy. I don't know how it happened. We were at... I met Teresa at Troy, through Sean and Bibby and...

MEG: Say who she is.

AV: Teresa was the lead singer for The Brat. I had seen The Brat before, but I really didn't know her. I had heard about her, I heard that she was flakey and she didn't show up to shows, and all this. So I was a little bit cautious when I met her. And then we just really hit it off. She's just wonderful. So we hit it off right away and then Angela came into the picture. And Angela and I had actually met years before when I was trying to form an all-girl band right out of high school. And Angela knew how to play. She was already playing, because she had been playing her whole life with her brothers. She came in and saw us playing... struggling to play Smoke on the Water... she's like you know...

MEG: Let me show you the chords...

AV: "Nice meeting you guys... I wish you success." But she did not join our band. But she knew who we were and we knew who she was. When she started coming back into Troy I suggested that we form a band together. At the time, I knew how to play three chords on the guitar. So they came over to my house, and all of us had acoustic guitars. So it wasn't going to be easy, because usually you have.. somebody wants to play drums, somebody wants to play guitar, but we all wanted to play acoustic guitar. So we got our three guitars out and somebody said "I have a song"... I don't even know who it was, and I said, I have a song too, and Teresa's like I have a song too. So we sang... a person started singing a song and suddenly one of us did harmony, another one did another harmony, and we just caught the harmonizing bug. And it was just every song was like... what can we put in there. It was really, really, rewarding working with those three women. You know all three women. You know the three of us. I was the third. But it was really different from other experiences I'd had. It's... everybody listened to each other. It was a very giving situation and we were all really supportive of each other. We were each writing our own songs, and I think what happened naturally was that whoever wrote the song, had the final say. You know, "I like that part... I don't like that part, could you try this..." You know, it's my song so... And there was a lot of respect during Las Tres.

MEG: You were there in the service of each other's songs.

AV: Yeah.

MEG: I was totally blown away too. It was the first time somebody told me "nah, we don't want that cello part." And I'm like "What!"

AV: Oh really?

MEG: I mean you know, it's like part of your immaturity.

AV: My immaturity?

MEG: No, no, mine, mine, mine... not yours... mine. You know. I was like "what! you don't want that cello?" What's wrong with you, you know? You had a song called "Butterfly"?

AV: Yeah - it was Angela's.

MEG: Yeah, Angela's song. I think I played on that song or a couple of songs. But looking back, I realize that was what was happening, was that you were all there to the service of each others songs and the person had the ultimate word. Of course, now I feel that way. If a friend calls me to do art, they want me to offer up whatever I do and they get to choose what it is and it's not up to me because it's their song. In the same way, now I get if it's my song, I want you to do what I say. I didn't get both of those sides before, but I do now.

AV: This is the bucktooth chord (playing air guitar)... and this one (changes finger position on air guitar) it's kind of broken down like an old Betsy... You know, so this is "Old Betsy.." So we had names like that. And then we'd try 'n get other people to play... when we had other people play with us, it was like... "well this one we don't know, it's called the bucktooth chord..."

MEG: I love that. I love that.

AV: Yeah. Later on when we were recording with Tito he's like... "Oh, that's a diminished seventh... I don't know, whatever..."

MEG: Da da da.

AV: Yeah. So.

MEG: Well that is so different from music now though. Now, in the industry, the formula is very simple, everybody knows you take somebody who looks a certain way, you blow dry them, have a designer dress them, you teach them three songs

and cut off their tail like a chango and send them out onto the stage to do this thing. Whatever it is. But they don't have...

AV: Yeah. To sell jeans or perfume.

MEG: Yeah, ultimately. But if you take that person and have them improv, they'll freak out! If you sit down with that person and go "let's just play around... let's just jam", they don't know what that is. Do the two chords... they don't even have the bucktooth chord okay? They have little formulas. In this business of being forced to... or calling this art is just.... it kills it... it just totally kills it. That's not what this is. So that explanation, the bucktooth chord. Girl! That's it. That's what it is.

AV: Yeah, I agree, as I started practicing, playing guitar more, and learning more chords, I actually found myself getting in a rut of like playing the predictable chord. I didn't have to search for the chord, I already know, you know, by going to G and A then I probably should go to D next, you know. And I'd started just falling into these patterns. Whereas before when I didn't know what I was doing, I would you know, find something that just sounded good by plucking it out. It was like reinventing the wheel, but my songs were more interesting when I was doing it that way.

MEG: You know what Alice, it reminds me of how I felt playing with you guys. It may be that playing with you guys was the first time also that you guys just went "well just do something... let's see how... you know just do that..." When I had done that in the past with a couple of other groups which I probably shouldn't name because it's not a personal thing, it's just recalling this experience. They would let you play to a certain point and then they would shut you down. And I didn't find that with you guys. It could be that at the end, one of you would say "nah, we don't want cello after all..." and I would freak out because I didn't get it. But during the process of actually putting the stuff out, it was like "venga lo que venga... whatever it is, it's all good... let's see what it is." To me what happens in the process, especially getting away from music reading. Here I am for the first time in my life pretty much, not reading music and using my ear on an instrument that's totally focused on producing music that's classical, western, European, written, notated music, and now all the sudden we are doing "bucktooth" chords. The freedom in that is just undescrivable to me. I rediscovered my instrument and myself in this act of opening up... a ver que sale. A little bit later also, I would find out that there were no mistakes. This came from working with dancers. Improv dancers. It's like, there's no mistakes, whatever you hit it's the... there is no wrong note. Wherever you are, dissonance, no problem, then you can resolve it. You don't throw anything away. So a lot of people are afraid to do that. Not only in music, but in life.

AV: Yeah.

MEG: And we are living in such a time with all these... we don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow... this week. The whole world is in a pee hole right now. And we were saying earlier at breakfast... for those of us who knew how to improv the

chances were that we would know how to survive this time. 'Cause whatever you have that's what you work with. And I think that's a lesson from doing improv. And also doing improv with women where whatever was happening there wasn't gendered to the degree that you made a space for yourselves, and for other people like me. I don't who else... other musicians played with you, but...

AV: Yeah we played with a few other... we played... Daoood (SP??) ... what was his last name? He played an instrument called a "trabeca" I think it is.

QF: The doombeck... the little metal drum?

AV: No it's a Middle Eastern drum.

QF: Metal though?

AV: No.

MEG: It could be clay... also, I've seen some clay ones.

AV: It was wood with skin. I thought he called it a "trabeca". So he brought his Middle Eastern vibe into it and then Tenorio brought in the mandolin.

MEG: Oh God! That mandolin, it was so great. I loved that mandolin.

AV: Yeah. That was amazing, and then other people we played with. We had Peter playing banjo.

QF: [Indecipherable]

MEG: So you were making space, not only for yourselves, but for other musicians... the assortment of Martians that we were, playing instruments that were not maybe traditional or not expected in a cool band, or whatever. And letting us come in and do stuff. I realize that now, in this conversation, I'm getting that.

AV: Yeah it was...

MEG: I had to go to Seattle to figure this out.

AV: Well, part of the reason is that all these people were orbiting around Troy, and so we... we'd get up on the stage and practice at Troy and somebody'd walk in and it's like "hey get up here" and pretty soon we had people who...

MEG: Sean I have to say, and Bibby were very encouraging to a lot of us. If you hadn't been playing, why not? You know.

AV: Yeah.

MEG: Where's your cello? Where's your whatever, come and o it, whatever it is. Here's the stage. Actually it comes down to having the opportunity and the environment in which you are encouraged to do something. This is what we do for children when we love them.

AV: Yeah.

MEG: You know, we make the safe space for them to try stuff out.

AV: I think that's it. That's what we keep saying about Troy, is that it was that.

MEG: Yeah. A safe space to try stuff out. But we need that as adults too, not only as children. And, I think as we get older and more rigid, more ego involved, or whatever it is that happens, there is not enough of that. You know, kinda non-judgmental stuff. "Let's see what you can do. Let's just try it and see what it sounds like." We know a lot of good musicians that are really afraid to step out of the formula.

AV: Yeah.

MEG: Really afraid. And yet you know, if they would just loosen up a little bit... Oh my God!

AV: And that's when you know you're failing. That's how you know you're failing. When you are so afraid of failure that you're not taking any chances. That's when... give it up.

QF: I have a secret recording of you and Rocio on "Better Things To Do."

AV: Oh yeah Rocio playing violin. Yeah.

QF: Violin and cello on "Better Things To Do." It's with Goddess 13. (Singing...) "Oh, I got better things to do... da da da..."

AV: Remember that song?

QF: Teresa's singing it...

MEG: Teresa singing this song?

AV: Teresa's singing it.

MEG: And Rocio and I are playing?

AV: Yeah.

MEG: Dang girl! My alzheimer's already set in. Jesus I'm like dementia, what is it? I have to hear it. Maybe if I hear it, it will bring it back.

QF: Yeah. I have it, when we go to my house we can hear it.

MEG: I think the important thing for me right now, I think the important thing of what we are doing this minute is the fact that we don't get opportunities to remember things either. So this act right now is helping us... like for me, it's helping me remember and redefine what it was to be in the short time that I was able to play with you guys, you know uh, what's that meant. There's not enough space for that. There's a lot of other stories that need to be told too.

AV: We made you who you are today.

MEG: That's right, that's right, that's right. You and Vaginal Davis made Chola Con Cello. Let's just tell the truth right now.

AV: Yeah... hahaha...

MEG: I didn't know you were fuckin' famous.

AV: I didn't know I was fuckin' famous!

MEG: hahaha... because I wasn't in the punk movement. And somebody told me something about "Alice Bag" and I said...

AV: Okay, can we not record this... this is going to be painful.

MEG: No, no, no... it's just that, you know they said this, and I wasn't sure who that was and then somebody said your last name and I go "Oh, you mean Alice Armendariz, I know who that is from Las Tres." And then I realized that you had this huge following and a lot of respect from that whole experience. And even now, I think...

AV: I have these completely separate lives. It's really strange. It's kinda disjointed. It's like people that know me, only know me as Mrs. Velasquez, or Ms. Armendariz, when I'm the teacher, and there's people who know me only as the punk rock chick, and then there's people who knew me from Troy that just, you know, know me in Las Tres and Goddess. It's strange.

MEG: What do you feel about that Alice? If you don't mind my asking, because I totally relate to this idea that you have these hidden lives. Like I had my life where I had this straight job and I'm a mom and doing all this stuff... and then I'm off with my friends and making art and acting crazy and totally feeling like, oh my God, thank God for this. But keeping those two things... now I didn't keep them separate, they

just were separate. And then there are moments now though when the stuff starts to collide - like this very moment right now, this is one of them. Where the stuff overlaps and you just kind of take in all that you really are.

AV: I think for me, I found that it was... when I was younger, and I was teaching, I felt like I had to keep it separate because I was afraid that the parents would freak out, you know, like...

MEG: That you said the F word on stage with Vaginal Davis.

AV: Yeah.

MEG: went and sang Chinga Tu Madre... parents might not like that.

AV: And I definitely had to have the costume for work. That's why when you said that, I thought, I have... There was a time in my life where I was living... who I was, was the same person, I woke up in the morning and I could step on the stage right then and I was that. And then when I started teaching, I had to sort of...

MEG: You have to bifurcate...

AV: Yeah. And then I had... half the closet was things that looked like what I thought a teacher looked like. That were comfortable... The costume... yeah, you have to be able to sit on the carpet.

MEG: Isn't that funny that the costume is for your straight job, not for your art? The art is like regular!

AV: That's who you are right, your regular clothes. The thing is that, sometimes if you spend a lot of time at work, you start feeling like, I'm becoming this.

MEG: Oh God yes! I keep telling myself that I'm in it, but I'm not of it. I'm in it, but I'm not of it! You know, I'm here to do certain work, but this is not all of who I am. And, these people don't own me. The check is good, but... if I didn't do Chuck and Buck, I'm not doing this, you know... Or, let me put it this way... We are doing it, but we are doing it on our own terms.

AV: Well... see I don't know then, because if we are wearing a costume, then I don't know.

MEG: Oh maybe on my own terms.

AV: There was another teacher at my school who's come in, in a mini skirt and boots, and you know...

MEG: Cute.

AV: But she was not just cute, she was kind of out there right. And I'm like "What are you wearing? Why are you wearing that outfit?"

MEG: Gonna flirt with a second-grader...

AV: But she was like "Oh... kids have to know that teachers come in all shapes and sizes and that we dress all different ways." And I thought "she's right, they do." But you also... we communicate something through our clothes. If you see somebody put on a chef outfit, you just feel like "I'm gonna get some good food 'cause that guy has a chef outfit on." You want to communicate seriousness, like "I'm gonna do my job, I'm not here to like..."

MEG: Not have my clothes be a distraction to the stuff I'm doing, because if I'm in that environment, I don't want to stick out, I want to blend in. I'm blending in for a reason though. I'm not blending in because I'm subservient, or because I'm giving up my identity, I'm blending in so that I can do this work...

AV: More effectively.

MEG: More effectively, and not create a distraction myself to the thing I'm trying to accomplish.

AV: Yeah, exactly. I think that's part of it. When I was working, I had this faux-hawk going where my hair was really short, but then I had long... but I could comb it in a way that looked really normal for school. And then at night...

MEG: Punk it out...

AV: I could punk it out, make it stand up! But, you're right, I think that was the reason, is that you wanna create a sense of confidence, and you also don't want to be a distraction. You don't want kids looking at your hair. You want them listening to you...

MEG: And have that be the issue. There's so many other things going on.

AV: Yeah.

MEG: Do you think this is... I don't know, are we going to dare to talk about aging?

AV: Aging? I have no problem with aging. I'm glad I'm... I mean I'm not sure that I'm ready to like... I tried letting my hair grow in grey...

MEG: Oh God girls... I know how that...

AV: And it bugged me... so there are physical things about aging that...

MEG: That suck.

AV: You know, like having bad knees... having to have cortisone in my knees so that they don't you know.. there's that kind of stuff.

MEG: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. But the shame of aging is what... I can't bear that.

AV: I'm proud of aging.

MEG: Well, the alternative is to be dead, and people don't seem to get that, so... but this idea of the shame of aging, I think comes really hard on women. Particularly women who are very attractive in their youth. And who are valued for the moment when they are rose bloomed and now you're like some dried up old thing. Man! That pisses me off!

AV: It's like our time now. It's like the beautiful women had their chance, now it's like the time for the just kind of normal girls to say "hey, now it's all evened out." All of us have droopy boobs...

MEG: Oh, not me, I'm sorry. I'll tell this story because it will make Quetzal laugh...

AV: Those don't droop because you park them on the cello!

MEG: Right, they've been propped up for a long time... Hahaha... I have to tell this story... Some artist, who will remain nameless, came up to me recently and he says "Maria Elena, I've decided to take on a new project and I'm going to be photographing older Chicanas, you know, elders, and um, nude. But, very, very, dignified and they have the last say in the photograph, and it won't be exhibited" and all this shit... he's going on and on about this shit. I said "you know what, dude, it's not time yet. Wait till I'm like 85 and I can take a teta and fling it across the room, then I'll do performance art encuidada, then you will really get an eye full." It's just this whole thing in performance art, every generation has to get naked. Every generation of performance artists has got to show you their dingaling. I have seen everybody's genitals over and over... I mean, performance art people, they pull this out, and pull out that. After a while it's kind of boring actually. It's like "Why are you doing this?" I mean all right, it curves to the right or the left, or droops "What the fuck are you doing?" You know? So there's shock value, and according to performance art theory they are exploring the body, and the body's geography, da da da... no... you're just kinda being an exhibitionist and it's kind of boring actually. I'm not that interested... it's just encuidado for encuidado's sake... eh... you know. Rachel Rosenthal, performance artist, the lady with the bald hair and the rat. Fabulous, fabulous teacher. I took a class with her right after my mom died. I was taking the class I think to survive the emotional stuff and all that. And we were doing all these different exercises... and this one kid got up... and we had to do an exercise that showed passion and an opposite feeling. This kid actually got up there,

sat down, pulled down his pants, grabbed his wank, and went at it. I was like.... and he was a white kid and there was a sense of arrogance and privilege in that shit that he did that pissed me off. No body else was grabbing themselves... this was his way of doing... you know what Rachel Rosenthal did to him? Bless her heart. She goes "Well, that was kind of predictable and ordinary..." This is after he got done. I thought, "Oh my God! the wisdom of that woman was like.." and then I thought "Okay, I'm all right." And then she said that put everything back in its place.

AV: That's good.

MEG: Yeah so that encuidado stuff is like, you know, a little bit predictable and kinda ordinary actually. It's like "What are you doing with that?" You know?

AV: With the aging?

MEG: No, no, no... with the encuidado stuff. But, the aging stuff, I think there's a lot of pressure on us to stay looking a certain way. I know women who have been very beautiful and very photographed. People who you and I both know, who now, at this age, they will not be seen in public. To go out, they gotta go to Nordstrom's and spend a week to get the shit together and color every whatever it is that they are doing to themselves. And I won't say that I don't feel that pressure, 'cause I do. I'm just trying to figure out how to make my way through the journey with some kind of sense of dignity and keeping myself... you know some kind of pride in who I am. Not to continue to shame the body. Old age is not for sissies man! This is the time when you're no longer considered sexual, you're no longer considered beautiful, you're no longer considered powerful. When in fact, if you go to Native American tradition of the Plains Indians you couldn't even be a healer until you stopped bleeding. You cannot be a Shaman, you cannot be a Medicine Woman until you stop bleeding!

AV: Yeah.

MEG: So there's other traditions. I've had to go and find other ways of being and other ideas, so that I can not lose my sense of self, and my sense of dignity, and my... this business of shaming... Man! That's a really huge thing for us. When you're young, 'cause you're young... the young girl that the kid comes up and puts that milk carton under her... or later when you are actually voluptuous or beautiful or whatever, and then there's a whole you know "we gotta rape and kill you then..." And then when you get older "well, now you're a piece of shit, you don't count." It's like "Wait a minute!" It doesn't matter which part you know?

AV: Yeah, I definitely feel that though too. That sort of like you're invisible now.

MEG: Invisible! Yeah. Exactly. Oh my God!

AV: It's like people don't wanna look at you when you're old.

MEG: We'll have to pull out the tata and fling it out.

AV: Yeah.

MEG: Oh my God! We'll get some attention now.

AV: It's like "Beware, old woman in the room." Yeah... we're not going to take any shit.

MEG: Yeah.

AV: Some of the most exciting... most wonderful get-togethers I've had have been with women who are all older - over 50 - and we all walk into a cafe or restaurant or something and it's like...

MEG: Take it over... hahaha...

AV: "Don't look at me the wrong way because you're gonna get it chopped off!"

MEG: "And my friends will smack you around too!"

AV: Yeah... it's just an incredible, incredibly empowering feeling. That like "I don't care! I don't care if you know..."

MEG: Yeah, yeah.

AV: I mean, I'm not... also there's a side of me that does want to look good, does want to put on makeup...

MEG: And does do that.

AV: And yes... you asked me yesterday if I Photoshop my pictures... yes, of course!

MEG: Blow dry the arugas just a little.

AV: A little here, a little crows feet, there it goes... it's a photo face lift.

MEG: But you're not obsessed with that or shamed... like I don't feel any sense of shame in you Alice. You are like every bit as rowdy as you've always been.

AV: I'm 52 years old and I'm very proud of it.

MEG: I'm 61 years old and I'm not done yet!

AV: Yeah.

MEG: I have low mileage and I have things to do. That's how I feel.

QF: Cool. Let's wrap it up there.

AV: Ok

MEG: I love you Alice... I'm so happy this happened. (Hug) So unexpected!

END