

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

DOROTHY ALLISON and CARMEN VÁZQUEZ

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

November 19, 2007
Guerneville, CA

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Narrators

Dorothy Allison (b. 1949) grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, the first child of a fifteen-year-old unwed mother who worked as a waitress. Now living in Northern California with her partner Alix and her teenage son, Wolf Michael, she describes herself as a feminist, a working class story teller, a Southern expatriate, a sometime poet and a happily born-again Californian. Awarded the 2007 Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction, Allison is a member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

The first member of her family to graduate from high school, Allison attended Florida Presbyterian College on a National Merit Scholarship and in 1979 studied anthropology at the New School for Social Research. An award winning editor for *Quest*, *Conditions*, and *Outlook*—early feminist and lesbian & gay journals, Allison's chapbook of poetry, *The Women Who Hate Me*, was published with Long Haul Press in 1983. Her short story collection, *Trash* (1988) was published by Firebrand Books. *Trash* won two Lambda Literary Awards and the American Library Association Prize for Lesbian and Gay Writing.

Allison says that the early feminist movement changed her life. "It was like opening your eyes under water. It hurt, but suddenly everything that had been dark and mysterious became visible and open to change." However, she admits, she would never have begun to publish her stories "if she hadn't gotten over her prejudices, and started talking to her mother and sisters again."

Allison received mainstream recognition with her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, (1992) a finalist for the 1992 National Book Award. The novel won the Ferro Grumley prize, an ALA Award for Lesbian and Gay Writing, became a bestseller, and an award-winning movie. It has been translated into more than a dozen languages. *Cavedweller* (1998) also became a national bestseller, a NY Times Notable book of the year, a finalist for the Lillian Smith prize, and an ALA prize winner. A novel, *She Who*, Is forthcoming.

The oldest of seven children, **Carmen Vázquez** (b. 1949) was born in Puerto Rico and raised in Harlem. She attended the City University of New York, earning a Bachelors in English and a Masters in Education. Vázquez lived and worked in San Francisco for almost two decades, becoming a seasoned activist and movement leader in causes ranging from immigrant rights to lesbian health. Vázquez was the founding director of the Women's Building in San Francisco, the Director of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, and the Coordinator of Lesbian & Gay Health Services for the San Francisco Department of Public Health. She was also the co-founder and co-chair of Somos Hermanas, a Central American Women's Solidarity Network.

Vázquez returned to New York in 1994 as the Director of Public Policy for the LGBT Community Center in New York City. She has published in many journals, magazines, and anthologies and is a featured speaker at activist conferences including the NGLTF's Creating Change. Vázquez is the former Deputy Director of Empire State Pride Agenda and lives in Brooklyn.

Interviewer

Kelly Anderson (b.1969) is an educator, historian, and community activist. She has an M.A. in women's history from Sarah Lawrence College and is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. History at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Abstract

In this two-hour conversation, Allison and Vazquez tell stories of young adulthood and realizing “who they are,” share their journeys through 1970s and 80s feminisms in San Francisco, explore the extensive emphasis on androgyny and hostility towards butch-femme within the lesbian community, and reflect on current debates within the lesbian community over trans identities.

Restrictions

Dorothy Allison and Carmen Vázquez retain copyright to this interview.

Format

Interview recorded on mini DV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Two 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Susan Kurka. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Sheila Flaherty-Jones.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

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Transcript

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DOROTHY ALLISON and CARMEN VÁZQUEZ
Guerneville, California

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ALLISON: (positioning the microphone on Carmen) — some clever little spot, and then tuck it in and button you up. I'm going to make you look pretty.

VÁZQUEZ: Thank you.

ALLISON: Which is hard. (laughter).

ANDERSON: You're already on, just in case something –

ALLISON: You've been here in this relationship for a while. So tell the children I'm an old married woman. I flirt, but I rarely do anything much more.

VÁZQUEZ: But you do the flirting well.

ALLISON: Oh, honey. (laughter) It's necessary, don't you think?

VÁZQUEZ: It certainly is.

ALLISON: What is life without flirting?

VÁZQUEZ: Not much.

ALLISON: Sad and tired. So how come — you left when? When did you leave San Francisco?

VÁZQUEZ: June of 1994, because I was bored. (laughter)

ALLISON: You're an honest woman.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, well, that's the truth. Start at San Francisco.

ALLISON: We left — we moved up here June of '92. I'd been on a book tour for about three months at that point anyway.

(break in audio)

VÁZQUEZ: What neighborhood were you in?

ALLISON: I was living in the Mission.

ANDERSON: Where?

ALLISON: On Oakwood, right off of 18th Street, near — between the park and Guerrero.

VÁZQUEZ: Smack dab in the middle of it.

ALLISON: In the barrio.

ANDERSON: The barrio.

ALLISON: I love that neighborhood.

VÁZQUEZ: What was that other street — Lexington?

ALLISON: It's all these little one-block streets.

VÁZQUEZ: Yes, I know, but a couple of blocks from the Women's Building.

ALLISON: Yeah. I walked to the Women's Building; it was two blocks away. I made friends with a woman that had a great resale shop on the way. It started to gentrify. I was dealing with gentrification from Brooklyn.

VÁZQUEZ: Right.

ALLISON: It started to get people being in condos and little wine bars and things. So *mi barrio* was going bad.

VÁZQUEZ: Your barrio became *la mission*.

ALLISON: Yes, yes.

ANDERSON: Did you ever go to the Women's Building?

ALLISON: Lots.

ANDERSON: Yeah?

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: What kind of stuff did you do there?

ALLISON: Oh, went to do programs and to attend programs. There were some great readings. For a while, there were meetings. We did so many *Out/Look* meetings there, although mostly we hooked up with a building on 16th Street, right across from the theater — 16th and below Mission, between Mission and — what's south of Mission, Van Ness?

VÁZQUEZ: Yep.

ALLISON: I'm forgetting the name of the theater. I find more and more —

VÁZQUEZ: Roxie?

ALLISON: — when I'm really tired. No, the Roxie is further north, or further uphill. It was actually an old theater and we did — we started the Impact readings in that theater. I don't know if you went to any of those.

VÁZQUEZ: Mm-mm.

ALLISON: They were fun. (laughs) But we were basically raising money to bring writers — to bring lesbians to *Out/Look*, and the only way we could do it was to put together the funding and the — we got the funding by holding these readings. Amy Scholder and I ran that program. She was still over at City Lights [Bookstore].

VÁZQUEZ: And when did you do *Out/Look*?

ALLISON: Let's see. We started *Out/Look* — my God, I think the first one was, like, '91 or '92. I can't remember. We did the Impact readings starting in '90 — '89, '90. I think the first *Out/Look* was '91.

VÁZQUEZ: And who was — there was a male editor.

ALLISON: Jeff Escoffier.

VÁZQUEZ: Jeff.

ALLISON: And, let's see, there were the two girls who had a scandal. I can't remember. The lesbian mothers — one of them was dating the supervisor secretly.

VÁZQUEZ: Carol or Roberta? Or you're not saying? (laughs)

ALLISON: Roberta was the one she was sleeping with, and her girlfriend found out. Mary — Things got complicated. (laughs) We were going into the office, and Jeff said, "My God, lesbians do adultery." (laughs) Yes, some lesbians do adultery. And they have this cute little boy. It was an interesting community, interesting writers, but that — First we were in the building across from — Victoria, the Victoria Theater.

VÁZQUEZ: The Victoria Theater.

ALLISON: And then we rented space in that huge building on — was it Guerrero? Yeah, right off the park. Guerrero runs by — no, not Guerrero.

VÁZQUEZ: Dolores.

ALLISON: Dolores, and it was the Dolores Street Building. We rented space in that for *Out/Look* for a long time, but then they turned it into a retirement residency.

VÁZQUEZ: Really?

ALLISON: Yeah. They kicked us out. And then, when we moved back down and Wolf was six, he went to school in the building behind where the *Out/Look* office is.

VÁZQUEZ: It was Benji. Roberta's son was Benji. Roberta and Mary's son.

ALLISON: Yeah. But I knew Chaz and her lover. I've forgotten her lover's name. Chaz made films. It got scandalous. I liked them, I liked them a lot. It's so sad that they were — they took monogamy and marriage so seriously.

VÁZQUEZ: Chaz or Roberta and Mary?

ALLISON: No. Chaz and her girlfriend. They really — You know, one of them was stepping out, and it was unforgivable. I'm like, It's just sex, for Christ sake. You love her, you've made a child, find some way to work this out. I think that they did work out a lot of stuff, but it was painful to watch.

ANDERSON: So maybe one of the places that we could start is — when Dorothy and I were talking about San Francisco today, she was saying that she showed up there in — what? — '87?

ALLISON: Yeah, yeah.

ANDERSON: That you walked into a bookstore, in your leather jacket with rhinestones on it, and just felt the hostility.

ALLISON: Huge hostility. It was the women's bookstore on Valencia. What's that called? [Old Wives' Tales] I am really tired, and names go first when I'm tired. It was a great bookstore, but, like, I walked in, and it was really clear that I was not welcome. Out of the three women in the store, two were actively rude, and one was barely forthcoming with information. They didn't want to take my money, and I'm like, I just

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moved to town. What's wrong with you? And I ran into that over and over. And quickly figured out that the lesbian community in San Francisco and Oakland was more splintered than even the community I knew in New York, which was pretty splintered.

VÁZQUEZ: It had been. It started to –

ALLISON: Deep and abiding resentments.

ANDERSON: Why do you think that was, Carmen, since you were there for the ten years before that?

VÁZQUEZ: Because somewhere in the mid 80s, you know, the AIDS crisis and the mass involvement of lesbians in AIDS care meant a drain from the women's community — from women's health care and from other things that women were doing in the community. But there was also, because men were dying and the leadership — the political leadership and the quote-unquote professional leadership of the community –

ALLISON: Of the lesbian community?

VÁZQUEZ: No, the male community — was dying, then it became clear to some lesbians in the Bay Area that there needed to be some attempt to fill that void and to move into quote-unquote political positions of power. You know, government appointments, run for office, do all that kind of stuff. There was something called — LAFA? Lesbians of Action [Lesbian Agenda for Action] — Well, I don't remember. I don't remember what the acronym stood for, it was kind of silly — LAFA, right? There was a conference and a very sort of conscious organizing effort to get lesbians appointed and into office. And that's some of where — you know, Donna Hitchens's run for judge and Roberta Achtenberg's decision to run for board of supervisors. Carol, I think was already there, or –

(interruption)

ALLISON: Sorry.

VÁZQUEZ: That's all right. Barbara Cameron got appointed to the health commission.

(break in audio)

ALLISON: I knew people at the health commission.

VÁZQUEZ: Jean Harris — do you remember Jean Harris?

ALLISON: Yeah.

- VÁZQUEZ: Jean Harris, Harry Britt –
- ALLISON: All of a sudden there were a lot of respectable lesbians.
- VÁZQUEZ: All of a sudden — well, exactly. All of a sudden there were a lot of respectable lesbians and a lot of lesbian political clout, which then meant, though, that there was a real separation between you, me, and them. That in order to be a successful lesbian, you had to aspire to public office.
- ALLISON: Or be directing a foundation.
- VÁZQUEZ: Or be directing a foundation.
- ALLISON: I met a bunch of those.
- VÁZQUEZ: And it also meant that the kind of grassroots organizing work and program development work that emanated from places like the Women's Building began increasingly to be marginalized. The Women's Building was a community center –
- ALLISON: Yeah.
- VÁZQUEZ: – a great institution, a great vision, great politics, but it was not any longer the place where, you know, the establishment could look and say, That's where lesbian leadership is coming from. Now it was coming from City Hall.
- ALLISON: That was so shocking to me. When I saw the Women's Building, I was like, Oh my God, what an incredible resource if we had this in New York. And then to look at it and see it being used marginally and hesitantly.
- VÁZQUEZ: Yeah. Well, that's too bad, because it wasn't that for its first ten years or so.
- ALLISON: But I missed all that. And all I would ever hear is, Well, there was this lesbian couple, and they ran this project and that project, and they broke up. Those stories I understood. And apparently that had happened with a couple of bookstores. But then it seemed as if there were just deeply personal divisions.
- VÁZQUEZ: Well, there began to be deeply personal divisions, because when people start running for office, you run campaigns and, like, who's supporting who? And who's giving money to who? Et cetera. And those divisions go deep. I also think that the AIDS epidemic was really the precursor to that. That there was such a shift from civil rights, organizing broadly around health issues and, you know, everything that's been touted as a

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San Francisco model in terms of the private/public partnership, that created a model for the nation in response to AIDS. That existed before AIDS.

ALLISON: Yeah.

VÁZQUEZ: I mean, there was a very vocal and well-organized community of health-care advocates that created the mental health clinic, all the substance abuse treatment programs, eventually Lyon-Martin Community Health Centers, that were actually part of the health department but really focused on LGBT mental health issues.

ALLISON: See, I met some of those people.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, and Pat. Pat Norman was a big part of that. And all of that organizing is what laid the foundation for there — that made it possible for there to be a real public/private partnership. When AIDS hit, I remember Pat Norman going around, in the first few years of the pandemic, talking about the gay cancer in a lone voice. I mean, she would come to community organizations to try and talk about what was happening and why, and what needed to be done. And, you know, for the first year of that, people were just, like, This woman is crazy. And Pat had to fight really hard to get the health department and the community to really pay attention to the issue.

But it took a toll, not just on the gay male community, but on all the lesbians that then also had to get involved in fundraising and in actual health care and advocacy for men who were dying of AIDS in San Francisco. So that's part of it.

ALLISON: Where were you? How did you wind up at the Women's Building?

VÁZQUEZ: That's a great story. I was kind of in and out of San Francisco, because I couldn't make up my mind, and I missed my family, and I was crazy. I was 20-something, between '75 and 1979.

ALLISON: Where was your family?

VÁZQUEZ: In New York.

ALLISON: Oh, so you were back and forth.

VÁZQUEZ: So I was back and forth between, you know, on Greyhound buses and in the back of some girlfriend's station wagon with the dog and —

ALLISON: An adventure?

VÁZQUEZ: Uh-huh. And then I came back for the third time. I think it was 1979. And part of what I — '78. And part of what I was looking for was a

community. I'm not — I mean, I was out when I was in New York, but that wasn't my community. You know, Harlem and the Bronx and Puerto Rican people were my community. So San Francisco was really where I came out, and I — I mean, I was a New Yorker. I was also wearing, you know, leather jackets and — I don't know — cutoffs and things like this, and I —

ALLISON: I should hope so, in '79. (laughs)

VÁZQUEZ: Right. And I went to Brady Street, which is where the first Women's Centers office was, looking for the women's movement. And it was this tacky little place, four-by-ten — or something like that — with, like, the phones ringing off the hook and nobody paying me any attention. But I was intrigued by what they were doing. So I read some pamphlets and realized that there were a whole bunch of programs they were running. And I sort of paid attention to some of those people. But, you know, it was like, Feminism? I didn't know feminism. I thought it was feminine.

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ALLISON: So you felt a little butch.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: Not my stuff.

VÁZQUEZ: A little lost and just, like, Feminist, feminism thing — that I was like, you know, Birkenstocks and all that kind of stuff.

ALLISON: They didn't know how to dress.

VÁZQUEZ: They certainly did not know how to dress. They still don't. And so I just kind of — I didn't pay them much mind, and I hooked up with a group of people in the Haight-Ashbury/Noe area that called themselves The Family. This is Barbara Neighbors-Glass and Jay Casselberry Jacqué Dupree.

ALLISON: Yeah.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, okay, and their girlfriends. So there were all these women of color and their white working-class girlfriends, and I said, "Oh." And that is how I got integrated into the San Francisco lesbian community; it was with them, and they were — they identified themselves as lesbian feminists. They just didn't — it was a different brand, and these girls were rough. I mean, these girls were packing, and I'm not talking dildos.

ALLISON: No, I understand.

VÁZQUEZ: Okay?

ALLISON: These are the people I was making friends with in New York, people I knew how to talk to.

VÁZQUEZ: Exactly. And, you know, we'd hang out at Scott's bar and get into trouble, and I had a great time with them. I was just doing odd jobs. For a while I worked at the cooperative in the Haight, and lived with a bunch of hippies in some place in the Haight.

But, anyway, at some point, Jay and Jacqué got jobs at this new Women's Building thing that I didn't know anything about. Barbara, BG, ran a production company, which was all about trying to produce Jay and Jacqué's music. And so she rented a place in the Women's Building, and they all wanted me to be a part of this. But there wasn't a job at the Women's Building. There was a job at Women's Centers, which was the collective-owned building, and the Women's Centers is Roma Guy and Dionne Jones and those girls, wonderful women, who eventually became great friends and allies. They had this vision that the building would be run cooperatively by a council of tenants, and Women's Centers would be one of the tenants. And that was all fine and good, except it didn't work, and 75 percent of the women that actually ran the building — cleaned it and booked the rooms and kept the books — were women of color. So you've got a white collective, and you've got all these women of color —

ALLISON: Doing the work.

VÁZQUEZ: — doing the work.

ALLISON: Mostly lesbians.

VÁZQUEZ: There you go. And so I was —

ALLISON: It was familiar to you.

VÁZQUEZ: Yes, and there was not a spot at Women's Building. So I was looking for a job. And Jay and Jacqué said, Well, there's a job opening at Women's Centers. And I said, "Well, why should I work there?" And they said, Because you could spy. (laughter) You can be our spy! I said I could do that.

So I applied. I think it was a membership coordinator position, or something like that, and I applied and I got the job. And, you know, within six months of being there, it was just hugely apparent. I mean, first, within a month of being there, there was, like, a fire by arson, there was a bombing, there was a monthly bomb threat. There was all this stuff. And there was incredible tension between the people that ran the Women's Building and the Women's Centers collective. And Roma and I talked about, you know, the only way this is going to work is if

you merge the two things. The community didn't care. The community thought the Women's Building and Women's Centers — what's the difference?

And there was enough controversy going on, because, you know, you had Alix Dobkin, you know, coming to the Women's Building, and there's, like, no boy children at Alix's concerts. So all the lesbians that thought that was insane were mad at us. And then all the lesbians that thought the Women's Building should be pristinely and only about estrogen were furious, because men would be meeting at the Women's Building and, you know, and then they'd call it the Men's Building.

ALLISON: (inaudible)

VÁZQUEZ: Oh my God, right. So we did. I mean, it took probably about a year's worth of endless collective meetings and things to get the two collectives to make a decision to merge, but they did.

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ALLISON: When was this about, when this took place?

VÁZQUEZ: Between 1980 and '81. I think the merger took place in about '81. And then from '81 to the end of that decade, the Women's Building really was fertile ground for an enormous amount of progressive organizing around the war in Central America, around immigration rights and issues — big controversies.

ALLISON: I was getting copies of newsletters and things.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, and big controversies about whether the Policewomen's Association should meet there or not, about whether Samois should meet there or not. And through it all, there was an enormous amount of integrity around issues of race and class. And the leadership of the organization throughout that period were always women of color and Roma [Guy].

ALLISON: Boy. Really thick and really complicated.

VÁZQUEZ: And there was something else, too. They became the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, but they were the Third World Women's Alliance.

ALLISON: Oh yes.

VÁZQUEZ: Do you remember them?

ALLISON: Yeah.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: They made coalition with some women I knew, but I didn't understand some of what — People really got mad and were fighting, and I couldn't understand some of what was going on at the Women's Building. When people would put their statements up — Well, this seems self-evident — but instead it would be controversial.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: Well, it was the alliances.

VÁZQUEZ: The Alliance Against — Third World Women's Alliance became the Alliance Against Women's Oppression. They were — honestly, they were a communist organization. They were part of the Line of March, and their mission was to create an analysis and then a working strategy for organizing.

ALLISON: And take over the building.

VÁZQUEZ: And the Bay Area, and really influencing the politics of women's organizations in the area, which they did. They really did have a lot of —

ALLISON: Some good stuff, but a whole lot of control issues. Sounds familiar.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: We call them Trots.

VÁZQUEZ: (laughs)

ALLISON: And they come in with really great stuff, and then the next thing you know, they've got the keys, and you're not allowed to meet anymore.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: Yeah. Okay, I understand all that. And I understood having to be careful, because you could never see — because, in fact, there were people who would present one agenda but had another agenda entirely.

VÁZQUEZ: Well, yeah, and when you're a community center — and so there are Trots and there are, you know, lesbians that want to be supervisors and there are — there's Hetrick-Martin [Institute], and they support the policewomen, and then there is leather dykes, you know, so like —

ALLISON: Who support the policewomen but don't want them to come to the meetings.

VÁZQUEZ: There you go.

- ALLISON: (laughs)
- VÁZQUEZ: And then all the women who don't — Del Martin wants to smoke at the Women's Building.
- ALLISON: And bring in liquor! (laughs)
- VÁZQUEZ: So how do you manage all that? How do you facilitate all that turmoil and conflict?
- ALLISON: You're never comfortable.
- VÁZQUEZ: No, and that was my decade there. I mean, that's where I cut my teeth politically. I was on the staff from 1980 to '84. And then there was a funding crisis, and I laid myself off because —
- ALLISON: Yeah. I know. We were talking about — I have a history of going on unemployment but continuing to do the same work.
- VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, on unemployment.
- ALLISON: I lay myself off, and come back when you can.
- VÁZQUEZ: And then come back and do the work.
- ALLISON: Half of my work was always raising money.
- VÁZQUEZ: Uh-huh, and I did that for another six years with the Women's Building. I finally left the board in 1991. So it was eleven years.
- ANDERSON: So what was your point of entry, then, Dorothy, into the women's community? It wasn't through the Women's Building.
- ALLISON: But I lived two blocks away, so I could walk over.
- ANDERSON: What was your nexus then? Where did you start?
- ALLISON: Oh, I moved — Well, one, I was working my way through all the women I could date in that year when I wasn't allowed to date no more than one at a time, and only once. I was doing the 90 days and 90 meetings, and not being in any relationships. So I could date anybody, but I could only date you once.
- VÁZQUEZ: Once.
- ALLISON: Which was great.

ANDERSON: That would be 90 women in 90 days.

ALLISON: Well, that too.

VÁZQUEZ: See, I did that in the late 70s.

ALLISON: I call it my third non-monogamy — No, I call it my third wild period, and that was what I was doing. Being wild in a context, trying to be more sane and trying to write. So a lot of my initial references were the writing community. And I met Jeff Escoffier. I can't even remember. I think I had gone to a reading, but it was at the bookstore. It was the bookstore that Carol Seajay used to own with her girlfriend. I'm blanking on the name.

VÁZQUEZ: I remember Artemis Café. I remember —

ALLISON: It was just down from Artemis Café.

VÁZQUEZ: It was just there. I see it.

ALLISON: I can see it.

VÁZQUEZ: Old Wives' Tales.

ALLISON: Old Wives' Tales. So I would go up to Old Wives' Tales, which, when I first moved there, I think they still had the one room, and then they expanded and got bigger, but eventually they had to get smaller, as money got tighter and strained.

VÁZQUEZ: Right.

ALLISON: And I think that was where I would go to readings, go to programs. I went to the Women's Building for some programming, mostly for readings, to listen to other writers.

VÁZQUEZ: There was another place where there was a lot of performance stuff also.

ALLISON: There were a bunch.

VÁZQUEZ: But near there, in that, like, strip.

ALLISON: There was the Shotwell House, but that was —

VÁZQUEZ: Shotwell House, yeah. Gosh, I remember that.

ALLISON: I don't know. Modern Times [Bookstore] had a little bit of space. There was a little bookstore that opened on 16th Street, that had a little bit of a space.

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VÁZQUEZ: But this was bigger. This was actual performance space, where they had comedians and meetings.

ALLISON: I mostly went to things that took place in the gymnasiums at various schools all over — the one off Dolores Park, the one up at Castro. And then I went into the writing community. So I had two different communities: the writing community and the leather community. And I had so many friends in the leather community that that was easy. So I went to their meetings, and I started running the safe-sex program with some of my girlfriends, and we did it as street theater, you know, doing comedy routines about safe sex. That was fun. We genuinely did have some questions about the necessity for us always to use dental dams. (laughs) We did numerous presentations all on that subject, and that's how I met Alix, was at one of those safe sex demos. She showed up to cruise.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: But pretty much I decided, This community is so splintered, so divided, I'm going to take my time and be really careful here in terms of joining organizations. So the only real organization I joined — I joined the Outcasts, and I joined the staff of *Out/Look* and became an editor. Other than that, I was mostly writing, doing readings, doing some public stuff, but limited. Because, mostly, I just had a tremendous amount of work to do, and I still wasn't — I was not healthy when I first moved. So I had to get able to walk and be more healthy.

VÁZQUEZ: *Out/Look* was three years, four years? How old was *Out/Look*?

ALLISON: Oh my God. It went on longer than I went with it.

VÁZQUEZ: It was the only serious thing that I remember.

ALLISON: Yeah, and out of it came a lot.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: Out of it came not just the conference [the 1992 OutWrite conference], but out of it came, oh my God, the Impact series, a kind of theory discussion group that we all put together — a bunch of us put together — to talk about a lot of issues that kept coming up. And there was just so much.

I was fascinated with the whole — I was fascinated with California history. It was a different lesbian history than I knew from the East Coast, so I would go to events and try to get that history, but it was really hard to get the real history. You could get the history for public consumption, but, really, what I wanted to know is, who slept

with each other and hated each other and would never work together again. I was very interested. And you could not find out who was serious and who you're making — you know, that coded information that you only acquire by working with people and when they begin to trust you. Sometimes even when they begin to trust you, they can't give it to you because that would be betraying —

VÁZQUEZ: Somebody.

ALLISON: Somebody.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah. And there's old memories out there.

ALLISON: And then, I came with a lot of history. I came with a lot of friendships with people in New York, some of whom then moved back to California. Cherríe came back, Gerol, Mirta came. Jewelle [Gomez] finally came after a long time. But a lot of people that I had worked with in New York would show up. And then it was easy because we knew each other and we could work on stuff together. But mostly, most of my interest and my energy went into the writing community, and I was — this is going to be awful to say, but in many ways I was deeply disappointed in what I found in the lesbian writing community in California.

VÁZQUEZ: Because?

ALLISON: They didn't support each other. And it wasn't serious in my terms, in my definition of how they should have been. But I had come off of *Conditions*, and I should have remembered that *Conditions* was really rare. But the fact that people really were not taking the work seriously appalled me. It wasn't just California laid-back. They just weren't doing the work, and they weren't supporting each other in doing the work, and, in fact, they were competing for resources and making it hard for other people to get their work done. I found that really — And I couldn't tell if it was the usual dyke-drama shit. You know, I'm not going to help her because Margaret is working with them, and I can't work with Margaret. You know. Or if it really was, I'm not going to help them because they might be good, and I want to be the only one. You know the only-one syndrome?

30:00

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: I ran into a bunch of that. I can remember trying to write for some publications in California and being told, We have our lesbian. Or, We have our radical dyke, and you're not the kind of radical dyke we want.

VÁZQUEZ: We have our visionary.

ALLISON: We have our visionary, yeah.

VÁZQUEZ: That's enough.

ALLISON: Which is just so appalling. And that people were letting it stand, that people didn't know how to fight back about it. It was really deeply disappointing to me. It was easier to go and work with *Out/Look* where people were really putting a lot of energy and being a kind of radical I understood. Some of them were — they weren't the kind of writers that I wanted to be, but they were serious community organizers. And they were very good on issues of race and class, at *Out/Look* anyway. Sometimes more lip service than practice, but enough practice for it not to —

VÁZQUEZ: Well, *Out/Look* was just completely unique, to my experience.

ALLISON: Yeah. These were experienced organizers who spent a lot of time and energy.

VÁZQUEZ: In the Bay Area, because it's so different from New York and the East Coast more generally.

ALLISON: How do you see it being different?

VÁZQUEZ: I don't see a whole lot of respect or support for artists.

ALLISON: In — ?

VÁZQUEZ: On the West Coast.

ALLISON: Yeah, that's what I mean.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah. I mean, if that's something that people do — I don't know, you know, like, it's a lark, or you do it on the side.

ALLISON: They don't take it seriously.

VÁZQUEZ: They just don't take it seriously, no.

ALLISON: It's a big shock. I mean, I knew California was different, and I knew that I, in fact, was a little bit too driven on some levels. But I couldn't understand why people were not really — I mean, there were no real strong writing collectives. People were not even trading work. And when I would find people — mostly through *Out/Look* — I'm like, Let's do some stuff, and find the people who would do some stuff. I mean, that's my whole friendship with Amy Scholder, was because Amy was willing to do the work. She was like, Okay, we'll put together a reading series.

VÁZQUEZ: Why? There's a greater degree of institutionalization.

ALLISON: Okay, that we also ran into.

VÁZQUEZ: Out here?

ALLISON: Yeah. Well, and then they had — there were some great lesbian writers. You know, I made my pilgrimage to go see Judy Grahn, and to talk to the people who had done some of the women's presses. But I couldn't get them to talk about what they were doing now; or get them to be engaged in anything that I wanted to do now — and now was 1987 and '88 and '89. Except for the girls that were working at *Out/Look*, and a few other people — like, people who were working with some of the alternative presses.

And mostly they were strangely queer. I don't know how to put this. I kept meeting people who just would not specify. They wouldn't be lesbians or heterosexual. They would not identify. And I was like, What is the big issue? What are you? And is it going to do me any good to work with you or not? (laughs).

VÁZQUEZ: I know you are, but what am I? (laughs)

ALLISON: Yeah. Then you find out they were married. Then again, not really married. California had some odd things that I just could not get a handle around. I was used to people being very forthright and taking some risks, but there it was just so much mystification. I didn't understand the need for the mystification. The only way I could explain it to myself is that these people must either have some complicated history, or they feel threatened in ways I don't understand. Eventually, I pretty much decided they did feel threatened in ways that — they did not want to be pinned down. Mostly, they were not specifically sexual. They were ambitious.

VÁZQUEZ: They're ambitious. Well, that's still true, and it was true a decade before that. I would keep having these conversations with different people about, Oh, new generation of queers who say they don't want to be boxed in, they don't want to be labeled, la la la la. And I'm like, What are you talking about? You know, I don't care what you call yourself. If you're a girl and you're fucking another girl with a dildo or fisting her, you are queer. You know?

35:00

ALLISON: You're probably a dyke.

VÁZQUEZ: You're probably a butch dyke at that. You can call yourself anything you like but —

ALLISON: Or a very talented femme girl.

VÁZQUEZ: What are you doing? What are you doing? And I also don't think that it's, you know, this generation or –

ALLISON: Some of it is class.

VÁZQUEZ: A lot of it is class, and a lot of white girls running around saying they can't be labeled and they can't be this. Because what they're saying is, I will not lose privilege over this.

ALLISON: Yeah, exactly, exactly. Or they've never been forced to confront who they really are. They've slid by for a long time. And then you have to remember there are a lot of — I ran into them again in California. I kind of lost track of them for a few years in New York. They were what I call political lesbians.

VÁZQUEZ: They didn't do it.

ALLISON: Yeah, exactly. They wanted to be in a lesbian relationship, but then they never wanted to fuck. So they couldn't take desire seriously, because they didn't take their own desire seriously. They presented as lesbians so long as they didn't ever have to prove it, as my girlfriends used to say.

VÁZQUEZ: But that's not just lesbians, that's like the whole goddamn gay movement they're all about. Then, you know, It's all about love. And I go, Mmm, I don't think so. Ain't nobody told you not to love somebody.

ALLISON: Yeah. And I can get behind love, but it's sex that's more troublesome.

VÁZQUEZ: It's sex that's the problem, and we keep wanting to run away from it and not name it, and you can't.

ALLISON: Well, they take that seriously, too. This is what I mean. I think it really is a class — because middle-class girls can slide a long time, but working-class girls — we don't slide so easily, mostly because we're supporting ourselves.

VÁZQUEZ: And our families.

ALLISON: And our families, and we've had to be serious at an earlier age. I think, actually, eventually a lot of middle-class girls do get serious and have to take themselves and what they want out of life seriously, but they've got so much cushion that they don't make those decisions earlier.

VÁZQUEZ: Well, why don't they have sex though?

ALLISON: That I don't understand. I don't understand why anybody would want to live a life without sex. I don't get it. I don't know how you survive. Maybe that's why all them antidepressants is being distributed, and they all have therapists. (laughs)

(overlapping dialogue)

ALLISON: I moved to California, and every single lesbian was a therapist. I'm like, You people must be really fucked up to need this much therapy. (laughter)

VÁZQUEZ: Uh-huh. Well, why is that?

ALLISON: I never met so many. I couldn't get quite comfortable with it, but that was also a lot of — The presentation of who is a lesbian was tricky for me. I couldn't figure out a lot of the clues. It was easy in the leather community. People presented, and they advertised.

VÁZQUEZ: It's part of the deal.

ALLISON: And it's easy in dyke bars — at least the bars that I was interested in going to. But then I would go — because I lived close to Amelia's, and you'd go to Amelia's, and lots of times, you'd have this crowd sweep in and you couldn't tell who the fuck they were or what they were advertising for. A lot of it, you know, I can be patient with and understand, but I was getting — I'd just reach a point where I'm not interested in playing that game no more, and I'm not interested in making space for you and being nice. I'm really tired of this. Let's get more directed about our lives. One, let's make a magazine that actually comes out on time and publishes some stuff of substance and work that encourages each other. Let's make a conference that actually happens, instead of taking a decade to waste my time planning something that never fucking happens. That was my big thing that hit me when I moved to California. People wasted so much time and energy.

VÁZQUEZ: In meetings.

ALLISON: Yeah. And I had just come off of thinking I was going to die, and I didn't have — I mean, I could go to some meeting if we've got something we're going to actually accomplish, especially if you and I are going out afterward. I don't want to go to a bunch of meetings that are just about verbal diarrhea. Oy vey! And it takes you three meetings to find out that the reason nothing is happening is because she used to date her, and they don't speak. My God.

VÁZQUEZ: That's the real agenda. Well, see, when I came out here, it was '77, '78. My experience was lesbians going back to the land, of white lesbians

taking on African names. You know, right? So a girl named Suzie would be Johimbe. And I'm like, What are you doing?

ALLISON: How come you're Johimbe? And how are you entitled to own that name?

VÁZQUEZ: And I could deal with Suzie, but Johimbe — what is that about? There was just no part of that culture that I could connect to. When we started talking and I said, you know, Jay and Jacqué and those girls — thank God they saved my life, and they gave me a framework for feminism that could make sense to me. Because if that had not been there, that would have been my only other reference, and I'd have just run away. I couldn't deal with it. I couldn't deal with any of that. And for me, it was such a massive sort of kind of denial of themselves: I'm — you know — I'm white and I'm a lesbian, and I'm all these things that I hate, really, so I'm just going to become something else.

40:00

ALLISON: And that's so sad. They didn't even know what to value about themselves. I can have sympathy for that. After a while, it gets to be a pain in the ass and a waste of time.

VÁZQUEZ: Well, it doesn't work because it's inauthentic.

ALLISON: And if all we're going to talk about is your personal problem with my life, I get tired of that, too. I don't find that to be entirely useful.

VÁZQUEZ: There's not a whole lot of change that's going to come of that.

ALLISON: No. The personal is political, but I'm not going to always want to talk about personal shit. Every once in a while, I want to feel like we're getting something accomplished. It's just that I thought the meetings were about organizing and getting something done. I had done CR [consciousness-raising]. I had been in a collective. I have done criticism, self-criticism, but I didn't think that was the end of my activism, and I don't think that was a goal of my activism. And to come to California and find them doing it all over again.

VÁZQUEZ: Were you here during the Queer Nation stuff?

ALLISON: Queer Nation — I did most of that in New York. But when I got to San Francisco, Queer Nation was meeting at the Women's Building, and I went to some of the meetings. That was interesting, because some of the structural stuff they were putting in place I actually enjoyed and thought was highly effective. There was about a year of useful organizing that I saw happening in there, before it started to —

VÁZQUEZ: Fall apart.

ALLISON: – back up on itself.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, with too many meetings.

ALLISON: Yeah, too many meetings.

VÁZQUEZ: Too much process.

ALLISON: Yeah. And process that didn't accomplish anything. I'm willing to process if we are going to accomplish something. I believe in being a foot soldier, and I will go to the fucking meeting and follow the agenda, and I'll follow the rules; but not if we're going to end up by saying that we need four more meetings.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: And a lot of that started happening.

VÁZQUEZ: And, you know, how much of that is actually really just about, I will not, I will not, I will not accept leadership?

ALLISON: Oh, a bunch, and we were really talented at that. And, of course, whenever we'd get a leader, we'd then proceed to destroy the leader. I'm familiar with that phenomenon. I have destroyed a few, and I've been destroyed a few times. It's a terrible disease. We have it as a community. We're a little better now, actually, but still there though. I see it happening. But then, I kind of understand. It felt to me like they were all still in college. That's what it felt like.

ANDERSON: Is that the middle-class thing? I mean, both of you guys have talked about getting to California and feeling a class difference, the granola phenomenon. You both have described that kind of thing. So I'm interested in how, at that time in the women's movement — post-sex wars, really lots of division happening in the women's community and feminism — how both of you created a space for yourself. Coming from working-poor, working-class backgrounds, identifying as butch-femme at a time when it wasn't very popular. You're more in the cultural piece of it (addressing Allison); you're more in the political piece of it (addressing Vázquez); but still, as working-class or working-poor people, and Puerto Rican and Southern, very much outsiders in terms of the dominant California lesbian scene. How you created space for yourselves, especially around the sexuality piece, which was really still highly charged in the late 80s.

ALLISON: Highly charged. But I had been working in a cultural milieu that took class and race really seriously, and took it in ways that meant you did something about it. You didn't just talk. Your organizing reflected that consciousness continually. I thought — I really did believe that that

was part of the culture that I would find in San Francisco. And then I found it only marginally so. It was really shocking to me, and it really was like stepping back into a feminism that really was more publicly middle class and desultory about issues that I didn't think you could be desultory about. That didn't seem to me to be — It wasn't what I expected at all, but it's much easier doing issue organizing. In issue organizing, a lot of that bullshit doesn't happen and people will do work. And they'll work across class and color consciously, because they're trying to get something real accomplished.

VÁZQUEZ: Get a law passed, get some policy change.

ALLISON: Or put in place a real service. That I understood. But a lot of the cultural work that I started doing in California was more general. When you're organizing a magazine or publishing a journal or planning a conference, it is more general, so, in fact, you make room for a lot of that messing around. But I didn't have any patience for the messing around. That got tricky.

45:00

VÁZQUEZ: For me, the Women's Building years really were foundational in that there was a lot of support for a race and class analysis that then got imbued into the kind of organizing work that came out of the Women's Building. So I just took it with me and into the next thing, into whatever the next thing was.

ALLISON: What was the next thing? The Women's Building — so then out of that grew a bunch of stuff.

VÁZQUEZ: Yes. But for me, it was about a year or six months or so that I was just like, I don't know what I'm doing. I went up to Navarro with my girlfriend, near Albion, near where Alice Walker used to live. I don't know if she still does. Then I came back into the Bay Area and did different things. I worked for about a year and a half as a community organizer for Community United Against Violence, and took a shot at trying to develop an immigrant rights organization called National Network for Immigrant Rights. But I eventually wound up as the coordinator of Lesbian and Gay Health Services at the health department. So what I did is I took my race and class politics and my butch identity, and just blew it up. I just said, "Okay, so I'm going to come to the health department, and I am actually going to dress better than those men sitting up there." And I did. So that, I mean, in my presentation, there was a way that I just said, "Fuck you. I am going to take this identity and I'm going to make it public."

Then I also — particularly during the time that I was with the health department — did a lot of speaking, writing, workshop organizing around lesbian health care and related issues, where I was very explicit about what I thought sex had to do with anything. And that period — from about '86 until I moved to New York — that also

gave me a national platform, because — guess what? Nobody else was doing it, and certainly nobody was doing it as an out butch who took pride in it and then just, like, put it out there. So the more I did it, then the more people — you know, the more there was an audience for it, just because nobody was talking about it.

ALLISON: You also established a reputation for the department, so that people like me were like, Oh, look at this interesting stuff that's happening down there.

VÁZQUEZ: Right.

ALLISON: So it became a reference point for me, of people who were actually doing real work.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah. And we did do real good work. I'm forever proud of the development of the Lavender Youth Recreation & Information Center, which came during my time at the health department in San Francisco; the support of Lyon-Martin, which almost died during that period; and the development of a real dialogue around lesbian health that went beyond what Amber [Hollibaugh] and I used to call the titty girls. Right? (laughter)

ALLISON: We can examine our breasts, thank you very much.

VÁZQUEZ: Because the entire focus of lesbian health care at that time — in the mid to late 80s and early 90s — was all around breast cancer — a horrible reality that needed to be addressed, but to constrain it to that was just, you know, it was ridiculous. And it meant that so many other things — hypertension, all the things that poor working-class women — you know, health issues they have to deal with, and the fact that we have health issues because we don't seek fucking doctors because we're scared to death of them. All of that. Sexually transmitted diseases. What did Amber used to say? Lesbianism is not a condom.

ALLISON: In any sense. (laughter)

VÁZQUEZ: In any sense. Don't go thinking that, girls.

ALLISON: You can still get diseases from each other.

VÁZQUEZ: Right. All of that were issues that were swept under the rug, not talked about. And a huge piece of why they weren't being talked about is because of what we were talking about earlier, that everybody's scared to death to talk about sex and to acknowledge —

ALLISON: They would have prejudices that they don't acknowledge, I kept running into.

50:00

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: I found that. Because I had to go see a doctor, and so I got the name of a lesbian doctor, went to see a lesbian doctor, and she was so appalled at me when I started talking to her matter-of-factly about my sex life. She didn't want to treat me.

VÁZQUEZ: She didn't want to know about your sex life.

ALLISON: She didn't want to know. I can't do Flagyl anymore because I've developed a sensitivity to it — I had a few little infections — and she was, it was (inaudible). And I'm like, You are in San Francisco. You are a lesbian doctor. And I'm going to walk out of here getting no treatment of any use because you're so ignorant and so bigoted. And that was when I started talking to people at the health department: "Give me a list of good lesbian doctors in lieu of these candy-assed, bigoted, silly children that sit and look you in the face and say, 'You really do that?'" Yes, and it feels damn good.

VÁZQUEZ: (laughs) Oh yeah, yeah baby.

ALLISON: Jesus.

VÁZQUEZ: Mm-hmm. The other thing that happened during my tenure at the health department was there was a moment in San Francisco when the community found out about abuse, violence. So then it was hysteria about lesbians who were being abused in their relationships, which needed to be talked about, but all that was being talked about was these awful perpetrators. I'm like, Well, who are they? And who they are turned out to be a lot, you know, working-class women in a relationship with middle-class women, and working-class women of color in a relationship with white middle-class women.

So then there had to be — There was a conference, or a day, at least a day — and that was horrendous. I mean, the amount of vitriol and anger and also honest pain that was in that room was overwhelming, and I couldn't figure it out. What do we do about this? I mean, how do you create something that's really going to address the needs of women who really are being abused? And figure out how their partners understand what their role is in that process without it being this witch hunt, which is what it became. Then I honestly don't remember what ever — or if anything ever — came of that, in terms of any kind of real program or organized effort to offer lesbians.

ALLISON: What I know of it all moved back into the already existing shelter movement, where, in some cases, it was better for it to be.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, well, maybe that's what happened.

ALLISON: And CUAV [Community United Against Violence] did some stuff.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, CUAV did.

ALLISON: But it did seem to me that there was this real panic. A lot of it got directed — and I sensed stuff, too — but a lot of it was just so clearly about class, and people acting out of assumptions out of very little information. God. But I didn't register that as — I didn't know that that was such a sudden thing in San Francisco, because we had already gone through it in New York.

VÁZQUEZ: It happened like (snaps fingers) that. And all I recall is a one-day conference trying to address it, and then it sort of went away almost as quickly as it showed up.

ALLISON: No, it didn't go away, but people stopped talking about it in public so much. We did a lot of support in the leather organizations. You know, it's also an epidemic — it's the same thing in gay men's relationships. In relationships, this is a dynamic, and the shelter movement works when it's allowed to work; when it's not dominated by conservative organizations that actively get in the way of providing services to queers. But it is almost always — Around class and color, it's really complicated any time you bring in the police.

VÁZQUEZ: And CUAV did do some good work around domestic violence, but my memory of it — what I was told in the Bay Area was that it was mostly men.

ALLISON: I know women who went to work at CUAV around that issue because they wanted to make a difference and bring some consciousness into it — people who had come out of bad relationships or battering relationships. But I haven't kept up. In some ways, taking the focus off of it helped, because the public stuff that was being talked about didn't help.

55:00

VÁZQUEZ: No, but it still goes on. I mean, that's —

ALLISON: Oh, Christ yes, Christ yes. And there is still not an easy entrée point. The people I've been working with lately are in Boston, and they're doing some great work in terms of services to queers around relationship violence. We have such a language for it now. (laughs)

ANDERSON: I've got to turn off the tape right here.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ANDERSON: All right. So let's spend one hour talking about butch-femme. I want to know — I want you guys to both think about what it meant 20 years ago and where it's gone. I mean, very unpopular, as you both know and have talked about, in the late 80s. And then it crested again, and then where it has gone in terms of trans stuff, I'd like to talk with both of you about. As a category in the community in general, but also what it's meant for you guys both over the last 20 years. And I think we have to start, too, by also just defining what it means and what it is now.

ALLISON: What is butch-femme?

ANDERSON: And its history for you.

ALLISON: But it changes.

ANDERSON: Yes. That's what I want to talk about.

ALLISON: Depending on where you're standing and when.

ANDERSON: Mm-hmm. That's what I want to know about. So who wants to start?

VÁZQUEZ: It's hard to do it. My first impulse is, it's hard to do it, just the last 20 years.

ANDERSON: Okay, true.

ALLISON: Besides, it's all about —

ANDERSON: So 30. I mean, in your lifetime, what it's —

ALLISON: How old are you, darling?

ANDERSON: You're both 58.

ALLISON: So we're grownups, more or less.

VÁZQUEZ: We are, honey.

ALLISON: Of an age. And you grew up in New York, right?

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah. I grew up in New York, in Harlem. I came from Puerto Rico when I was about five, spent about three years on the Lower East Side. And then my family got this great three-bedroom apartment in the General Grant Projects on 125th Street, in Harlem, and I lived in Harlem about 14 years, and then moved to the Bronx.

ALLISON: When did you realize who you were?

VÁZQUEZ: See that — really, about five or six. There was a little girl, a little German girl that used to taunt me and taunt me and taunt me, on the Lower East Side, and I was completely taken with her, and I wanted to be with her. I wanted to play with her, I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to do all those things. And that was Judy. But my first sort of conscious experience of sex and sexuality, of being something — I don't think *lesbian* was even a word that I knew — was when I was 15. I mean, there had been other things. I was in some home that I had been sent to for God knows what reason, because I was acting out. And in there, there was a sexual experience with a girl, where I definitely knew that that was not play. I was wanting to kiss that girl, and I wanted to get up on that girl and do all kinds of things to that girl. Still, though, it didn't have a name, and it was just, like, something that happened.

My first conscious sort of experience of lesbian-something happened at around 15, and that was with someone that was about seven years older than me, definitely a femme, and I wanted her. I wanted her. And I wanted her in a way that — in the only way that I knew, which was that I wanted to get her. And I did. (laughs)

ALLISON: You did?

VÁZQUEZ: I did.

ALLISON: You figured out what you were doing.

VÁZQUEZ: I figured out what was I doing, and I got her, and got thrown out of my home and all that kind of stuff as a result of it. But it began for me in New York. Then there was another relationship, also with someone that was about seven years older than me, also a femme, who hung out with other femmes. I was 15, 16.

ALLISON: You were a pet.

VÁZQUEZ: I was. I totally was. And I was taken in by these women, and it was mostly in their home. You know, they'd have parties, and I'd come, and I was the pet, and I was always the boy. Sometimes they'd take me out to, like, these places where you had to have passwords and stuff like that, and it was all very secret and very exciting, completely exciting. I would dress up in my shirts and ties and things, and they took good care of me. I mean, I was never in trouble because they took really good care of me, these girls. So that's — I mean, that's my formative experience of what it meant to love a woman and to be involved with a woman. I was completely Puerto Rican, subculture, these lesbian femmes. I didn't know that they called themselves anything.

ALLISON: There wasn't even the language.

5:00

VÁZQUEZ: There wasn't language that I can recall anyway, but they clearly were that — high-femme at that, with the heels and the tight dresses. And we'd go to the dance clubs. And they'd all have to be worried about how much alcohol I consumed because I was 16 years old, and they could be in a whole lot of trouble, but somehow managed to avoid the trouble.

Then, for me, there was not a conscious identity around butch, really, until I left New York, because when I was living in New York, my girlfriend was Angie, and Angie was a girl, and I was the boy. Our best friends were Jay and Lucy, and we all went to high school first and then college together. And Jay and Lucy had a baby, and Angie was the godmother. We'd spend weekends together, and Jay and I would hang out, and Jay and I would watch baseball and football games and drink rum, and the girls would cook, and we'd have parties that would be like that, mostly straight people except for me and Angie, but it was family.

ALLISON: It's interesting how that happens, because when I started bringing lovers home, I brought home butch girls, and it was really fascinating for me to watch how quickly my family just accepted them as boys and treated them like boys.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: But that, to a large extent, I had pretty much trained them by that point, that this is who I was and that was what I was after. So long as I brought him really good butches, that was okay.

VÁZQUEZ: Good boys.

ALLISON: But if I brought home femmes, they didn't know what to do. (laughs) I did a few times, and they —

VÁZQUEZ: I think that if I had brought home a butch, my family would have been a little freaked out.

ALLISON: Yeah, probably.

VÁZQUEZ: But I didn't.

ALLISON: It wasn't your reference point.

VÁZQUEZ: It wasn't my reference point, and I had no reference point about any of that stuff until, I guess, college, graduate school. This is late 60s, 70s. And then, as just sort of my horizon began to expand, I began to meet gay people, but still mostly gay men, and it was disco. I don't know. You know, it was disco.

- ALLISON: Everybody was dancing.
- VÁZQUEZ: And everybody was dancing the hustle. So I just kept doing what I used to be doing, you know? I used to dance salsa, and so I was still leading. Nobody was going to lead me on the dance floor, that's a fact, right?
- ALLISON: Mm-hmm. I love the way you say that, "That's a fact, right?" (laughs)
- VÁZQUEZ: I mean, that was life as I knew it in New York. And, again, it was not political. It was social. It was then a part of my late college, early graduate school experience. And through most of that time, I was with the same girl, Angie, my high school sweetheart. And then we broke up, the program ended, and New York was not big enough for us. And then I moved to San Francisco.
- ALLISON: One woman at a time.
- VÁZQUEZ: Uh-huh.
- ALLISON: Yeah, we moved across country. (laughs) We're doing a geographic — Yep. I know about that.
- VÁZQUEZ: And then I moved to San Francisco. And it was in San Francisco that — all of what I talked about earlier in terms of discovering a gay world and then a lesbian community.
- ALLISON: And the language?
- VÁZQUEZ: And the language. But the language then was, like, *lesbian* and *lesbian feminist*. I had no idea what people were fucking talking about. I honestly did not. And I did not have a word for myself that was the word *butch*. I knew that I liked lesbians who looked like my mother.
- ALLISON: Yeah, okay. (laughs)
- VÁZQUEZ: And were girls. Then, I think, with Jay and Jacqué and them, then some language did come around. Okay, so, like, You're a butch, and you like femmes. And so then I started to incorporate some of that language. But in my efforts to try and find a social life and a political life, and to integrate into the lesbian feminist community, it was horrific. It was horrible, because I had no reference point. Flannel shirts.
- ALLISON: Only if they've got a lace teddy underneath it.
- VÁZQUEZ: Oh, baby.
- ALLISON: I've dated some of those.

10:00

- VÁZQUEZ: I mean, I couldn't even wear a flannel shirt myself (laughs), much less date a woman who was wearing one. So it was complicated. It was really complicated to try and figure out what was going on, what did that mean. And there was an awful lot of rejection, and there was an awful lot of, What are you doing? You know, You're a traitor, you're — you know.
- ALLISON: Who would say you're a traitor? Family, friends?
- VÁZQUEZ: No, no, no. White lesbians.
- ALLISON: Oh for God sake, yeah.
- VÁZQUEZ: Feminists.
- ALLISON: Yeah, I remember.
- VÁZQUEZ: Take the tie off. What are you doing? And a real push towards an assimilation into more androgynous lesbian — whatever — presentation, even though that was still never who I was attracted to or who I ever fucked.
- ALLISON: They always read as asexual to me, that whole androgynous thing.
- VÁZQUEZ: Well, that's how I read it, too. So that's sort of about 20 years ago.
- ANDERSON: Right. (addressing Dorothy Allison) And where did you — how did you know? I mean, how did you get to that point?
- ALLISON: I figured out really quickly, when I was young, that I was just — in my mind, I was just queer and — no, we should use the word *weird*.
- VÁZQUEZ: Weird, right.
- ALLISON: I figured I was probably sick, I was probably crazy. But mostly what I figured was that I was wrong. I did not want to get married. I was not interested in boys. I was not interested in dating. I didn't have none of the erotic charge, and I had two sisters who were — one was two years younger than me, and one was six years younger than me — who were highly successful, aggressive heterosexuals at a very young age. In my family, it was like, Dorothy's not like that; Dorothy reads a lot.
- VÁZQUEZ: Right.
- ALLISON: But a lot of it was also protective, because I was getting raped on a regular basis. And by the time I got old enough and strong enough to counter that and more or less stop it, I found a place of safety, which was to be asexual. But that doesn't stop desire or fantasy or lust, so that

a lot of my erotic fantasies centered on being trapped with girls in terrible situations in which I alone could rescue them by performing acts of enormous suffering.

So then a lot of that became a lot of my erotic charge for most of my teenage years. I would fall in love with girlfriends, and I tended to fall in love with the more butch girls, although I did not have a language. I didn't have the word *lesbian*, except that I read constantly, and gradually — And then I discovered my stepfather's porn, and that's where I found lesbians. He had an enormous collection, and that's how I found what I found out about lesbians. The things I knew about lesbians was that they were rapists and they had hairy nipples. It was porn that I was getting all my education from. I found that kind of a turn-on.

VÁZQUEZ: (laughs)

ALLISON: Big mean dykes. So then a lot of my references and my erotic fantasies came out of porn. So — big, mean, dangerous dykes. Ooh, where are they? How can I find them? Then I went off to college and fell into a relationship with one of my resident advisers, and she was aggressive enough to be interesting, but she really wasn't my stuff, and to a certain extent, she was kind of androgynous. I fell in love with a Russian student, who was aggressive enough and butch enough to be more of my stuff, but not quite. It took me a long time. But meanwhile, I made do.

15:00

VÁZQUEZ: One has to.

ALLISON: One has to. And then I discovered, in the South, old dyke bars, most of which were in bad neighborhoods. And pretty quickly, that's where I started seeing women who were more my erotic charge. And they looked so good and so scary and, on some levels, were dangerous. Well, but quasi — Mostly what I found out was that, when I found the butch girls, they just all wanted to marry me. (laughs) And I was supposed to do the laundry and the cooking and, you know, tie their ties. And I didn't want to get married. I had a horror of any kind of marriage entrapment.

One of the things that I ran into really quickly when I did start finding butch girls and having sex with them and dating them, was that they thought I was a slut. And I was, in terms of — I don't know about the Northeast, but in the Southeast, there's a real — there's a culture that disdains women who want to fuck around. A good femme lesbian finds herself a good butch, settles down, and plays house. I didn't want to settle down and play house. I just wanted to have a really great time and go home; or send them home if they came with me. And so that was problematic and troublesome.

After college, when I found the women's movement in Tallahassee is when I found the more lesbian feminist androgynous community, and that was — They read. You could talk. I could be a

feminist and organizing, but having sex with them was not satisfying at all, with a few exceptions. There were some good butches hiding under those flannel shirts, but they tended to be more working-class girls, and they tended to be older. And, without fail, they all wanted to marry me. So there would be these constant dramas.

So I had two lives. I had my lesbian feminist life. I lived in a lesbian collective. I was sleeping with a number of women in the collective, and it was okay. Mostly I was fucking them, because it just didn't work for them. To do me, you had to have sincerity. You know what I mean.

VÁZQUEZ: I do. (laughs)

ALLISON: But they did not know what I was talking about. So I would leave the collective and go to the pool hall and find sincerity, bring her home and then —

Interestingly enough — and problematically enough, especially when I moved further north — I was dating across color, because I found a better quality butch girl. (laughs) At least for a time. Because there was such a huge emphasis on androgyny among white lesbians, it became so asexual to me. And, let's be clear, not much talent. Because it's my opinion that the secret to good sex is a willingness to be humiliated, and that means taking some risks. And they were all so hesitant and tentative, and that doesn't work.

VÁZQUEZ: They all talked about, why you are a lesbian is because it was safe.

ALLISON: For some of them, yeah.

VÁZQUEZ: Well, girl, that is not what sex is about.

ALLISON: No, no.

VÁZQUEZ: It never has been.

ALLISON: No. And I had a huge bent towards being safe. I could organize a lot of safe, because sex was really problematic for me — because I had a lot of resistance to being helpless, but I eroticized it at the same time. So you really had to be committed to have sex with me.

VÁZQUEZ: I get you.

ALLISON: Yeah, it is serious. Mostly I wouldn't find people who were worth the trouble. Or they pretended as if they were, but they couldn't deliver. More of that will kill you.

VÁZQUEZ: And, you know, there's something else about a butch — well, for me. My understanding and sense of wanting to be with a woman and

wanting to take care of her and wanting to please her had very little to do — There is not a woman I've ever been with who made my tie. Never.

ALLISON: Never tied your tie for you?

VÁZQUEZ: Never tied. Took them off.

ALLISON: They only tie it after they start marrying. (laughs)

VÁZQUEZ: And I did always want to marry them, but I did not — nor did many of the butch-identified women of color that I hung out with — expect that they would cook or clean the house, or do any of that stuff.

20:00

ALLISON: Exactly.

VÁZQUEZ: That was not part of the bargain. And I was never interested in femmes that were submissive.

ALLISON: Oh, honey, let's be very clear. I was not submissive.

VÁZQUEZ: No, no, no. I get that.

ALLISON: Unless you pushed it, and then I could become instantly submissive.

VÁZQUEZ: No, no, no. But you know what I'm saying? I mean, culturally, that was not a part of the deal.

ALLISON: No. We're talking about femmes with an enormous amount of authority.

VÁZQUEZ: Enormous amount of authority, independence, and attitude. And that's gotten me in trouble. But I was never looking for the one that would take care of me.

ALLISON: The little wife.

VÁZQUEZ: No. I was never looking for the little wife, and neither were the folks that I hung out with. However, we did expect a certain amount — So you're asking about what does it mean. It means a lot of things, but privately, it means a whole — everything that I've just been talking about in terms of a sexual relationship that is charged — and, you know, that has changed completely for me, from, like, charged and I'm the one that's in charge — thinking that I was the one in charge. Thinking. (laughs)

ANDERSON: You're no longer disillusioned, Carmen?

VÁZQUEZ: No, I'm not disillusioned at all. And I'm very happy that I'm not, but it took me a long time to figure that piece out and go, like, Okay, so, really, why it works is because there is an exchange of power; that there is surrender and submission, but it's surrender and submission on both our parts. Who's in charge is not dependent on my identity as a butch or hers as femme.

ALLISON: And it shifts.

VÁZQUEZ: And it shifts, but that was not something that I understood consciously and could have even had language for.

ALLISON: Even once I understood it, I couldn't talk about it, right? What language I had?

VÁZQUEZ: No. Twenty years ago, no. I could not have said what I just said. And it's evolved for me. And on a very personal level, erotically, it's been this very gradual sort of moving to a place where I understand that part of my desire to please her involves her ability and her desire to take me. That just was not — that little baby-dyke butch person, no.

ALLISON: You could never have articulated it.

VÁZQUEZ: No, could never have articulated that, and would have been scared to fucking death of it, because then, what did that mean about who I was? So, you know, under the sheets, there's been that evolution. And publicly it means that I have permission to present as I present, which is generally like this, sometimes with a tie, but always in a male-identified place, whether it's casual or dressed up. You know, and I'm a fussy butch, darling. I mean, I do my nails. I'm a metrosexual. (laughs)

ALLISON: We call you *the prince*.

VÁZQUEZ: My shoes are always shined and, you know, my shirts are always pressed, and that is — I mean, that's just been true for a very, very, very long time. And then, you know, in that public space, then I want her to also be — to look good. You know.

ALLISON: Well, when I started finding those bars — starting in D.C., and then in New York — it was just like, I'd just sit with my mouth open. And I would date women who'd say, You know, you mean well, but you spent too long in the women's movement. I mean, you'll never be as good at this as you would have been if you hadn't done that. And to a certain extent, they were right, because I have this whole rebellion against the expectations of high-femme drag. What would work for me is if we were going to be frank about how I can fetishize it. Then I could do it, and enjoyed it and could play with it, especially when I was younger.

25:00

Then, as I got older, I started to get annoyed at how much work this involved. But when lust is riding the tide, oh Jesus God. And those girls — man. I remember the first time I was in a dance bar in New York and they played “Thriller.” All of a sudden, all of these women in tuxedo shirts, full suits, and girls in heels so high I couldn’t see how they were dancing, hit the floor, and it was like, Oh mamma. I’m going home to change clothes and come back.

VÁZQUEZ: I am wet right now.

ALLISON: Yeah. Presentation and courage. God, the sexual lure of courage, yeah. But the lesbian feminist community actively, militantly rejected it and critiqued it and held contempt for it, which meant that a lot of my core stuff I either had to hide or battle for, and at different times I did different things. Early on, especially when I was young, I just took it as a given that I would not — that there would be only coded ways in which I would be a genuine femme in the lesbian feminist community. That changed over time as I lost patience with them. Especially when I was in Tallahassee and I started — I got some of my working-class butch girlfriends to come to events in the lesbian feminist community. You only had to treat one of my girlfriends bad once, when I became a terrorist. You know, you don’t do that to a woman I’ve had sex with and admire and honor. I’ll rip your throat out. So then I wasn’t so good at hiding for a while. It got tricky.

VÁZQUEZ: Thank you, honey.

ALLISON: Well, you know what I’m talking about.

VÁZQUEZ: I do know what you’re talking about.

ALLISON: (inaudible) I was just not capable of standing it. But it got bad and painful, and a lot of times I felt like a failed femme, both because I couldn’t live up to the expectations of the community that was my erotic community. Meanwhile, lesbian feminism was absolutely vital to my life, and the work was vital, and I’m meanwhile trying to get them to be just a little bit more accepting, make some shifts there. Dancing on razors all the fucking time.

VÁZQUEZ: And just be a little bit nice about it.

ALLISON: Manners.

VÁZQUEZ: Manners.

ALLISON: We could, you know — And it was the South, so I had some hope with manners. But to get them to actually look at their analysis and see the

flaws. And it was all about class and getting them to register class. Well, it's larger than class, but class is a big piece of it.

VÁZQUEZ: The androgynous-whatever thing — that got so elevated and still is. I mean, I think that there has been a period of objectifying and glorifying male identity in women. No, no, seriously.

ALLISON: That's a pretty long history.

VÁZQUEZ: A very long history, but it's not authentic.

ALLISON: Okay. It's authentic when it's your personal reference point and you can articulate it. As a movement, no, I don't think — I think you're right, that it hasn't always been authentic. I do think the ideal is an almost asexual androgyny.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, and it still is. And it's like, You know, it's okay, it's all well and good, Carmen, if you go out and articulate a defense of butch-femme, and if you can be titillating and you can talk about it and everybody loves it and there's an audience for it. But don't you fucking go and actually be that person and expect that you're going to have any real decision making or power in the movement, because you're not. This is not a movement that will tolerate male-identified people at its leadership. It never has and never will. And it's also a movement that keeps saying, No, we are not. So for me, butch-femme is so fundamentally and completely about an erotic signaling that that's what it is, folks. Here we are in the world and, actually, we fuck.

ALLISON: And in order to fuck, we have got to give erotic signals to attract the object of our desire.

VÁZQUEZ: That's right. And in the mainstream movement, the one that dominates — it's not all queers — but the one that dominates, you will not talk about sex. Goddamnit, you will not talk about sex, and you will not signal it. Right? So leather signals it, butch-femme signals it, all that stuff signals it.

ALLISON: Flirtation signals it.

VÁZQUEZ: Flirtation signals. So then, you know, they want to go talk on the TV about, We just want to get married.

ALLISON: Then we get a honeymoon. (laughs)

VÁZQUEZ: And presents, and we will have –

ALLISON: I want to register at Nordstrom's.

30:00

VÁZQUEZ: We will have little boys on the cake and little brides, you know, with the gowns on the cake, and we're going to talk about how much we love each other.

ALLISON: No, they have cakes with two girls. Two brides.

VÁZQUEZ: Two brides and two gays and gay boys in tuxedos. So that's the thing, and that's the end of the conversation. And the gay movement does not want to have a conversation with America about the fundamental fact of who we are — that we are sexual people.

ANDERSON: It's prudish.

ALLISON: It's very prudish, yeah. It's also prejudice, the same kind of prejudice that I found when I was a slut. The first thing I discovered is that in a lesbian feminist culture in New York, when all the shit hit the fan, all of a sudden I was again a slut. And I was a slut, so I was willing — But I wanted there to be honor for sluts.

VÁZQUEZ: There should be honor for sluts. (laughter)

ALLISON: I wanted respect. We're acting on desire. I believed that that was a feminist ideal. You know, autonomy of the body, autonomy of lust. Let's give it some respect and give it its place. But there was a triumph of this asexual androgyny that was really problematic for a lot of lesbians. I sometimes wondered if it wasn't the compromise made with heterosexuals in early feminism, but that's too nefarious.

VÁZQUEZ: It is the compromise. It's still the compromise, they're still doing it, and it's not just lesbians that are doing it. Gay men did it, too. They gave up their leather and they gave up their macho-slut ways and all that kind of stuff.

ALLISON: Gave up their drag queens and cleaned it all up.

VÁZQUEZ: Cleaned it all up.

ALLISON: Log Cabin Republicans, Jesus help us.

VÁZQUEZ: But it's true. And I think AIDS had an awful lot to do with shutting down the sexual adventure, exploration, talking about it, writing about it, you know, really living in the reality and consciousness of what it is that makes us different as a people. Our culture is different because we fuck people of the same sex, and nobody in any position of leadership in gay America is going to say that.

ALLISON: Well, some have. Always keep in mind, we're talking in generalities.

- VÁZQUEZ: I'm sorry, yes.
- ALLISON: But there have always been — I mean, my friend Eric Rofes.
- VÁZQUEZ: Absolutely. Eric did, and I do, but Eric and I were always marginalized.
- ALLISON: Yeah, yeah.
- VÁZQUEZ: You know, Eric did, Amber [Hollibaugh] did. You know, many of us have, and we get applauded for our courage, but we get marginalized.
- ALLISON: Every once in a while we'll have our moment where we'll get applauded.
- VÁZQUEZ: Oh yeah, we'll get lots of applause.
- ALLISON: Some recognition, some authority, but as you just said, it disappears real fast. (overlapping dialogue)
- VÁZQUEZ: And it's not the message, it is not the message that mainstream gay America wants to put out.
- ALLISON: Well, I think that dovetails with mainstream heterosexual America.
- VÁZQUEZ: They don't want to talk about sex either; that's true.
- ALLISON: And the bargain that most heterosexuals strike is safety. They acquire safety in return for giving up desire, it's always seemed to me.
- VÁZQUEZ: So everybody gives up on desire. What a crazy world.
- ALLISON: Except that everybody doesn't. Everybody still — they wind up in an autopsy report with a banana up their butts. (laughter) Don't you know what I'm talking about? They will find a way.
- VÁZQUEZ: Oh God.
- ALLISON: Trying to coax the gerbil back out. It's funny, we could do lots of jokes, but for most people it is that damn serious. People will risk their lives to get what they need. And, you know, sex is like hunger. It is a hunger.
- VÁZQUEZ: It is.
- ALLISON: And if it is definitely necessary, people will risk their lives and destroy themselves to accomplish desire, even while actively denying it. I mean, look at — most of the Republican conservatives have some little secret, and they're the ones that wind up with bananas up their butts.

VÁZQUEZ: They are.

ANDERSON: How do you defend, both of you, who spend a lot of time with the younger generation of gender variant and gender queer/trans — the vanguard. How do you defend or explain butch-femme to them? Well, I mean, you're on college campuses all the time. You work with young organizers all the time. How do you explain it to them?

ALLISON: I don't think you explain; you model. You talk frankly about desire and your own history. That's the best way to do it, in order to get them to speak and to feel that they have a safe place to speak.

But you have to be willing to be humiliated and to be wrong. I can't tell you how many times — I did a talk down in L.A. some years ago, and I knew not to answer the question when it was asked. I knew it was going to blow up on me. There was no way around it. And it was that same old question, which is, "Well, how do you feel about the transgender young?" And, "You know, I read something in which you said that you were dating a woman, and then she started to smell different, and you didn't want to have sex with her anymore." I was like, Yeah, well, that's true. I am an old dyke. And if you smell like a boy to me, you step off of my erotic markers. And the moment when you do that transition, we can be friends and we can be a coalition, but we can't be fucking lovers. It's not happening. The immediate response was, "Well, you are prejudiced against transgender people." I said, "Well, I don't have sex with them; they're not my stuff. I'm a dyke. I am a dyke." (addressing Alix Layman, off camera) Do you want to join, Alix?

35:00

ALIX: I'm just thinking to myself, Well, I'd fuck them. (laughter)

ALLISON: Yeah, baby, but you're different. Bless you. Actually I did fuck some, but I couldn't have them fuck me, which is where it breaks for me.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: But I can't stop thinking about it, you know. Because I'll train myself to be, in many contexts, a dominant femme, an aggressive femme, but that's not my stuff. My stuff — I want someone who can, you know, make me, take me; it's safe enough for me to give it up and go down and be taken. There is an exchange. But transgender people assume a different gender position in my matrix. Now that doesn't mean that doesn't have anything to do with their right to do this or be this or, in fact, all the cultural complications. I have enough libertarian in me that I actually do fight for the right of people to shift their gender and make those choices. Meanwhile, though, what I'm seeing happening to a lot of butch women is that, it's almost like a replication of the triumph of androgyny. It's the triumph of transgender, where all of a sudden young

butch women believe that, Oh, there is no butch. There is male or female, and I'm going to shift the matrix.

VÁZQUEZ: But they're not shifting it.

ALLISON: No. It actually gets more complicated. Or they'll do some changes, like have top surgery, have their breasts removed, take hormones, assume a lot of male persona, assume a male persona in the culture.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah. I think Dorothy is right, that you don't defend it; that you try as hard as possible to be honest and explain your own reality. And I do not accept the notion that the transgender experience is the be-all and end-all of, like, what is queer transgression. That, in fact, when you make a decision that you will cross over and make the transition from male to female or female to male, that you're entering the binary, baby. I don't care what anybody says, but it looks straight to me. It looks straight to me, and I have no interest in that. I do defend completely the right of any individual who feels that they've got the wrong body. Go change it. But that doesn't make you queer. You know?

And I know I don't want the space that I occupy as a female-bodied person who does identify as male in many ways, to be obliterated. I want the right to live in this female body as a male-identified person, and, you know, to the extent that that space gets shrunk, I get really scared and pissed off, honestly, because why should it be shrunk? What was the fucking point of feminism in the first place if it wasn't to create a space where women could make this decision about our bodies? We will do what we want with our bodies. Some of what we want to do with our bodies is, you know, have vanilla sex, sixty-nine, seven days a week. Fine. You know? And some of what we want to do with our bodies is fuck as hard as we can and, you know, use toys and our bodies to do that with. And that's okay.

ALLISON: If we accept that continuum, but if we go back to the binary, then we're back in trouble. A lot of the young people that I meet who are in some kind of transition really don't want the binary, but they do want to occupy — they want to assume some of the place and privilege of the binary. Mostly what I run into are young women who want to transition, but only partially. It's interesting to me, partly because, in fact, transitioning is not successful. You don't become a man. But I meet a lot of young women, especially when I go to colleges, who are in some form of transition, are living not really as men, except that they — because they present as men. So on the street, they get treated as men. That means that they step out of a lot of what happens to women in this culture.

VÁZQUEZ: Well, they step out of what happens to me in this culture.

ALLISON: And butches, yeah. They stop being butches.

40:00

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah. They stop being butches.

ALLISON: That's an ugly detail. But meanwhile, they want to still be in the queer community, and they want the authority and position and — let's be clear — privilege that we have ascribed to butches in our culture, but they want to erase the concept of butches. Because they do want more — they want to be the primary. They want to be honored because they are gender outlaws, and in some way they have defined butch as not being outlaw enough. And that's where I get into trouble, because I grew up thinking that the bravest thing in the world is a butch woman, and the second most bravest thing is the femme. We won't even go into what I think that also goes.

ANDERSON: And why do you think?

ALLISON: If I'm going to live in a world in which my sexual icon is being constantly denigrated and denied, I'm in trouble. And that has been something that's happened in the last decade a lot.

ANDERSON: So is butch-femme being replaced by trans then? Or who partners with them?

ALLISON: It depends. Early on in San Francisco, a lot of the people that I knew that transitioned began to live as faggots, but they didn't relate so much to — they had some relationships with gay men who had begun as men, but their primary relationships were with each other, and they both became faggots. And they enacted an almost ritual recapitulation of gay men's — some of the gay men's leather bar scene more than anything else. And when they were in relationships with femmes, it was really tricky, because, in fact, on some level there was a lot of hatred of the female inculcated in that. That's a little of what I ran into.

Some of the people, like Kate Bornstein, what they were talking about, which was kind of a more complicated concept of gender, made more sense to me and was more feminist to me, but a lot of the young people lost patience with that. They didn't want to stay in the complicated categories. They wanted more simple categories, and they wanted to be the vanguard — you know the concept of the vanguard? So they wanted all the power and the honor, and to be the next big powerful thing. And in some ways they have been — a lot. But there seems to me to have been a lot of stepping back on feminist issues at the same time.

ANDERSON: And what happens to femme in all of that? That's what I want to know.

ALLISON: High-femme girls dating high-femme girls. That, too.

ANDERSON: That doesn't have a lot of charge for me. I don't know if it does for you but –

ALLISON: I've done it. It doesn't have a lot of charge for me, unless, of course, we're going to really ritualize it. Then I can get some charge. But that's all fetish.

ANDERSON: But if our companion category is butch in terms of the erotic connection, then what happens when that category is disappearing?

ALLISON: A lot of despair, a lot of frustration. But then again, when I go to a college campus — like at Smith, because I went to the working-class women's group there, the network, and there were a lot of young femme girls, and they're in relationships with trans people. And sometimes that makes me feel really sad, because they're missing something, but they don't know they're missing something.

ANDERSON: Then it makes me really worried about the gender piece of this, because as masculinity becomes more and more valued, and as our ideas about gender in this culture become much more rigidified and retrograde these days, then there is even more dismissiveness and even more misogyny in the lesbian community, in the world at large. And so femme becomes even more denigrated if we don't have butch anymore; if we only have butches who are transitioning to men. I'm just wondering about both of your thoughts about that. How do you have an authentic sort of feminine lesbian identity in that kind of a context?

ALLISON: Well, the problem is the word *authentic*. I don't know what that genuinely means. What's authentic for me is probably different from what's authentic for, like, the 22-year-olds that I meet at Smith. It's part about what their erotic iconography is, on some level.

45:00

VÁZQUEZ: You know, I don't know. I mean, I think it's a conversation that femmes need to have in a more public kind of way. I mean, I think it's scary. It's scary to think about that, because femme — at least what I've always known all my life — is a gender expression that has everything to do with desire for another woman.

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Exactly.

VÁZQUEZ: Not a man. So I would think it's pretty scary to be a young person who is a femme and really has desire for women, but can't find any women.

ALLISON: Well now, but they're finding women. They're finding women in transition, forming relationships, and they have that same lioness, protective stance about the women they're developing relationships

with. I can point you to a bunch of writers who are addressing this and talking about it. I just don't find –

VÁZQUEZ: But what do they say about the piece where they want women? Or do they not say that anymore?

ALLISON: They do not address that, but instead what I see in the writing is that they're defending their right to still call themselves lesbians even though they're in relationships with people who are becoming men.

VÁZQUEZ: Huh?

ALLISON: Yeah. (laughs) "Huh?" is one of my responses. At the point at which, if you've transitioned and you've become a man and you're in a relationship with a woman, isn't that heterosexuality? I will acknowledge the complexity of your journey of having made that shift –

VÁZQUEZ: Right. But it's not –

ALLISON: – but meanwhile, your girlfriend is still identifying as a lesbian.

ANDERSON: Yeah, but there was all that gender crap that comes with heterosexuality, so where does that put us? I mean, how does the scale work?

ALLISON: What are we in now? It's November of 2007, and it is only in the last year that I'm beginning to see any opening at all on genuinely discussing these subjects. Because, frankly, in the last decade, the response to any discussion has been horrible, and people have been attacked so virulently and driven off that you can't even open a discussion. There was a femme conference in San Francisco where some of the discussion started happening, and, yeah, it blew up. Some of the discussion blew up in a huge, vitriolic yelling-at-each-other stuff.

But people keep coming back and keep asking the questions. It tends to be us older ones. We're like, You know, we want to raise this issue again. But you've got to be willing to grit your teeth to step into that fray. We have not yet really had the discussions like we're talking now, in part because this is complicated shit. It would be easier to say, If you transition, if you change your gender, you step into the binary, you've stepped out of queer. No one is allowing that to be, to let that stand. And I actually don't think it is entirely true anyway.

VÁZQUEZ: No, it isn't entirely true. My point earlier was that there has to be at least room for a discussion.

ALLISON: And a more complicated discussion.

VÁZQUEZ: A more complicated discussion that says, Okay, so if you're not doing that, stepping into the binary –

ALLISON: Show me what is queer about what you're doing.

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah.

ALLISON: Yeah. And show me how, in fact, it's feminist, and what does it lay the groundwork for in the future? This is where I get in trouble.

VÁZQUEZ: And show me where you and I, you know, still fit into this equation.

ALLISON: We might not.

VÁZQUEZ: Well, hell.

ALLISON: But I'm happy where I am, and they can come visit. I'll fuck them.
(laughs)

VÁZQUEZ: Yeah, I know.

ALLISON: On some level, in New York, when I just kept getting into tactics like, Okay, you guys want to make your town look like that? You live in your town. I'm going to live in my town, where at least the girls are more interesting and I get what I want.

Meanwhile, we're living in somebody else's town. We're living in America, dominated by a gender that hates all of us, and that's going to be way complicated. On some level, we need coalition, and we need to have these discussions and take it a little further. I do actually believe that we're at a point where we're beginning to be able to talk about some of this stuff again. But, you know, some of these people are deeply resistant because they have career made around it. They're the vanguard, and they've established –

VÁZQUEZ: Well, it's also interesting that we're having this whole discussion, right? And some of what pissed us off 30 years ago was the androgyny thing. And now, you know, 30 years later, we're looking at the dissolution of butch-femme and the evolution of transgender-something. Actually, we were just talking about female-to-male trans. Of course, there's a whole other conversation.

50:00

ALLISON: Well, we fought so hard on the male to female, and I have a very complicated response to all that. I'm basically — I've just decided we need to keep in mind, if you have transitioned from male to female, you come into your life as a woman with all of the conditioning and entitlement of a man, but you're living as a woman, and so some of your condition is going to be different. But I long ago decided, if you're self-defining as a woman, I'm going to take you as a woman.

VÁZQUEZ: Yes.

ALLISON: If you're self-defining as a man, I'm going to take you as a man.

VÁZQUEZ: Yes.

ALLISON: I just think people have the right. What's troublesome is when they're self-defining as a man, but meanwhile they want to be taken as queer. I'm having some hard time with it.

VÁZQUEZ: And running off with our femmes, damn it. (laughter)

ALLISON: Or snatching up the good butches and marrying them. That's not an issue for you.

VÁZQUEZ: No, baby. (laughs)

ALLISON: And since I'm an old married bitch, it's not that big a deal. You know?

ANDERSON: All right, I'm turning off the tape, you guys.

51:00

END TAPE 2

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Susan Kurka, December, 2007.

Edited by Sheila Flaherty-Jones, March, 2008.

Addendum to Interview with Dorothy Allison and Carmen Vázquez

Carmen Vázquez
July 21, 2008

After reviewing the transcript, it was evident to me that the impact of race on gender identity and expression, particularly as it relates to butch-femme identities was given significantly less attention than class or gender.

For me, there simply wasn't enough safety. I shared with Dorothy a class identity and with both Kelly and Dorothy, an embattled sense of gender expression. As the only butch in the room, it was relatively easy and even fun to share thoughts on my experience of an evolving butch identity and sexuality with two femmes. But as the only person of color in the room, thoughts on race were not easy to share and/or they came up infrequently because there was no one in the room who could reflect that reality back at me.

My experience of butch- femme in working class communities of color is very distinct from what it has been with white middle class women. My coming out experience is couched mostly in poor and working class communities and nowhere in my experience of adolescent and early adult lesbian life and love do I ever recall a single instance of "androgyny" among the women I hung out with and those who became my lovers. There were butches who absolutely could not pass and there were femmes who passed as straight all the time in their working lives and moved with ease through the night in the company of their butch lovers. No one questioned the authenticity of those identities. That's just how lesbians were.

The more stone the butch, the more likely it was she worked in manual labor and her femme girlfriend in an office or restaurant. I was cocooned in a working class Puerto Rican and Black experience through my mid twenties and while never really "stone", my attire and presentation (with one regrettable attempt to become and appear straight in my teens) was always male. I experienced my share of homophobia and of hiding where I could, but among my circle of friends, straight or queer, androgyny was simply not a valued identity. Nor were we consciously critical of the sexism imbued in butch and femme identities. Guys were guys and girls were girls. Butch possessiveness (and sometimes violence) and femme jealousy (and sometimes control) were a way of life. Guys pursued the girls and wooed them forever. Girls never asked for the first kiss. The guys watched baseball or football and the girls shopped. We all played bid whist.

The notion that men were the enemy would have been ludicrous for me and my peers in Harlem and Washington Heights circa 1969. The "man" was rich or a cop. He was not my brothers or my best friend, Jay. There was, therefore, no reason for me to discard my love of boxers, shirts or ties.

My point is that the devaluation of my male identity was something I experienced almost exclusively within a white and middle class context. Like Dorothy, I credit feminism with saving my life, but that was made possible by my friendships and working relationships with women of color and white femmes (including lovers) who identified as feminists, did have a consciously critical awareness of sexism and retained butch and femme as valued erotic identities. The ethos of radical white lesbian feminists and their rejection of everything male would simply have been too painful a choice for me to make without the intervention of women of color and white femmes.

I do not identify as a transgender person and can't really speak to that experience. But what I recall and still experience in queer working class communities of color is a cultural embrace of transvestites (e.g. drag queens and kings.) I don't know that level of cultural embrace extends to individuals who actually transition. It remains an embattled identity and certainly not one viewed as "vanguard." For me, the

notion of transgender as vanguard, like the elevation of androgyny among lesbians, is a white and middle class phenomenon that just doesn't speak to me despite my two degrees and now middle class existence. It is mostly a white and campus based dialogue that I believe would be a very different dialogue in communities of color.

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